Do Not Forget His Name: Making and Remaking the Self in Everyday Writing

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“DO NOT FORGET HIS NAME”: MAKING AND REMAKING THE SELF IN EVERYDAY WRITING

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To my mother, for her unyielding strength, courage, and love.
You are the bravest person I know.
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ABSTRACT

On February 21, 1871, Mrs. Cooper surrendered her one-month-old son Walter to the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity of New York, a Catholic institution designed to care for unwanted and abandoned infants, along with a letter in which she explains her circumstances and begs that her son Walter be cared for. While Mrs. Cooper’s affecting letter suggests much about the difficult circumstances faced by poor, single mothers in Victorian New York, it also stands as a persuasive text in which Mrs. Cooper makes a case for herself as a mother and a respectable woman. Moreover, Mrs. Cooper’s letter is not unique; rather it is one of many left with infants at the Foundling Asylum. This dissertation analyzes 17 of these Foundling Letters in order to examine the ways in which the Foundling mothers construct maternal and respectable selves.

I argue that the Foundling mothers balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to 1) secure care for their children and 2) argue for their worth as women and mothers. To do so, I analyze the Foundling Letters through a braided lens consisting of three interrelated theoretical concepts. First is the context in which the letters are written, which I have conceptualized as three stories: that of single, working mothers in Victorian New York, of the Foundling Asylum as an institution, and of the Foundling mothers as individuals. Second is scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. The primary means through which the Foundling Mothers construct maternal and respectable selves is through the balance of rhetorical strategies of deference—or appeals to a perceived gender, class, and/or moral inferiority (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay)—with rhetorical strategies of assertion—or refutations of such inferiority and appeals to equality. Scholarship on deference and assertion, though, focuses primarily on the writing of elite women,
which the Foundling mothers certainly are not. Theories of everyday writing, the third concept, provide guidance in accounting for and valuing the everyday nature of the Foundling Letters and mothers.

The Founding mothers’ balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to compose respectable and maternal selves illustrates a rhetorical sophistication in a population not often considered sophisticated: 19th century working mothers. In brief, the richness with which the Foundling mothers use writing to compose maternal and respectable selves has much to tell about how ordinary women use writing in their everyday lives. Thus, my analysis of the Foundling Letters expands the field of Rhetoric and Composition’s understanding of women’s writing, particularly by 1) providing a more nuanced view of deference and assertion as rhetorical strategies and 2) providing a method that future scholars can use to study archived everyday writing.
CHAPTER ONE

“DO NOT FORGET HIS NAME”: INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUNDLING LETTERS

1.1 Overview of the Study

On February 21, 1871, Mrs. Cooper surrendered her one-month old son Walter to the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity of New York, a Catholic home for unwanted and abandoned infants, along with a letter:

Kind Sisters,

you will find a little boy he is a month old to morrow  it father will not do anything and it is a poor little boy  it mother has to work to keep 3 others and can not do anything with this one  it name is Walter Cooper and he is not christen yet will you be so good as to do it  I should not like him to die with out it  his mother might claim him some day  I have been married 5 years and I married respectfully and I did not think my husband was a bad man  I had to leave him and I could not trust my children to him  now I do not know where he is and he has not seen this one yet  I have not a dollar in the world to give him or I would give it to him  I wish you would keep him for 3 or 4 month and if he is not claimed by that time you may be sure it mother can not support it  I may some day send some money to him  do not forget his name

Yours Respectfully

Mrs. Cooper

In reading Mrs. Cooper’s letter, it is difficult not to be moved by her poverty, her despair at leaving Walter to the care of strangers, her desire to

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1 In my transcripts of the Foundling Letters, I have reproduced the punctuation exactly. Some Foundling mothers use punctuation (although not always correctly) and some, like Mrs. Cooper, simply leave extra spaces to indicate the start of a new sentence. In full transcripts, I have reproduced the punctuation exactly. In quoting sentences or phrases, I have added punctuation as needed for the grammar of my sentences.
fulfill her obligations as a parent, and her final plea: “do not forget his name.” The 202 words she wrote in her letter are seemingly all that remains of Mrs. Cooper. We do not know, for example, her full name, how she grew up, or what happened to her and her children after she surrendered Walter to the Foundling Asylum\(^2\). While those 202 affecting words suggest much about the difficult circumstances faced by poor, single mothers in Victorian New York, the letter also stands as a persuasive, rhetorical text in which Mrs. Cooper makes a case for herself as a mother and as a respectable woman. The letter illustrates, in other words, not just a grieving mother explaining, and perhaps justifying, why she has surrendered her son, but also a rhetor persuasively negotiating care for her child and arguing for her own worth as a mother and a woman. Moreover, Mrs. Cooper’s letter is not unique; rather it is one of many left with children at the Foundling Asylum in which mothers argue for their maternity and respectability as they petition for their children’s care. The archives of the New York Historical Society (NYHS) hold hundreds of similar letters dated between 1869 and 1884\(^3\), a corpus that I have come to call the Foundling Letters. This dissertation analyzes 17 Foundling Letters in order to examine the ways in which, within the language of their letters, 17 Foundling mothers construct maternal and respectable selves.

The story of these Foundling mothers, the women who left letters with children they surrendered to the Foundling Asylum between 1869 and 1884, is really three interwoven stories locating my analysis of the Foundling Letters. The first story is that of poor, single working mothers in 19\(^{th}\) century New York City; the Foundling mothers, as the content of their letters

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\(^2\) The Foundling Asylum changed its name to the Foundling Hospital in 1880; however, because the name change took place at the end of the period on which this dissertation is focused – 1869 to 1884 – I use the name Foundling Asylum throughout.

\(^3\) While there may be similar letters written during other periods, the letters studied for this dissertation are collected from a series of scrapbooks that are archived together and that only contain letters written between 1869 and 1884.
indicates, were overwhelmingly single, working mothers who faced both extreme poverty and intense social stigma based on their perceived illicit sexual activity. The second story is that of the Foundling Asylum as an institution and the foundling child as a political and discursive figure. The Foundling Asylum opened its doors in October of 1869 after New York City experienced a sharp increase in infanticide and abandoned infants (Miller; Sisters of Charity; Campbell; Connelly; Gordon). Both the creation and the institutional policies of the Foundling Asylum were influenced by a political, economic, and religious culture in which theories of reform, which viewed illegitimacy and the foundling child— and all foundling children were presumed illegitimate—as the shameful evidence of moral degradation on the part of the poor, collided with reform theories that viewed the foundling child as the vulnerable victim of poverty in need of saving both physically and spiritually (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Stansell). The third story, that of the Foundling mothers as individuals, has largely been lost, as their letters are among the few remaining records of them. When mothers surrendered children to the Foundling Asylum, they typically spoke with Sister Irene, the institution’s director from its opening in 1869 until her death in 1896, or Sister Theresa Vincent, her second in command (Walsh; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). Discussions between mothers and Sisters were rarely recorded. Thus, as Sister Marie De Lourdes Walsh writes in her multivolume history of the

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4 At the beginning of each of their biennial reports, the Sisters recount the origins and exigencies of the Foundling Asylum. Thus, information cited ‘Sisters of Charity’ can be found in all of the biennial reports listed on the References page.

5 There were several ways that a child and an accompanying letter could be brought to the Foundling Asylum, as I will enumerate in the chapter two. During its first year (1869-1870), there was a cradle in the foyer of the Foundling Asylum where children could be left anonymously; however, due to the overwhelming number of children surrendered, the cradle was removed by the end of 1870 (Walsh). After the cradle’s removal, women who brought children to the Foundling Asylum spoke with members of the staff, usually Sister Irene and Sister Theresa. Thus, while some of the Foundling Letters were literally left with the children, others were mailed to the Foundling Asylum later. Unfortunately, unless the method of distribution is mentioned in the letter, which it typically is not, there is no way to tell exactly how each letter made its way to the Foundling Asylum, as envelopes or any material accompanying the letters were not archived alongside the letters. More information about how the Foundling Letters were archived can be found in chapter two.
Sisters of Charity of New York, the Catholic order that founded and ran the Foundling Asylum, the “true history” of the Foundling Asylum and the mothers they aided “lies buried with the noble women who guarded its secrets carefully as a most sacred obligation” (79). All that remains of the mothers’ stories are the Foundling Letters themselves.

These three interwoven stories—of poor, single working mothers in 19th century New York City, of the Foundling Asylum, and of the mothers it aided—provide context for explaining why the Foundling mothers used their letters to petition for their children’s care and to argue for their worth as mothers and women, as well as the rhetorical and linguistic moves they used to do so. The primary mechanisms used by the Foundling mothers to compose maternal and respectable selves, upon which I focus in this dissertation, are rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Rhetorical strategies of deference are those in which the mothers, like many women writers before them, acknowledge a perceived gender, social, or cultural inferiority in reference to their audience (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay); in contrast, strategies of assertion refuse to acknowledge inferiority and/or appeal to equality. What is significant about the Foundlings mothers’ use of deference and assertion is their dynamic movement between the two, as it is through this movement or balance that the Foundling mothers construct maternal and respectable selves. While the use of deference in women’s writing has been researched by many scholars (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman), studies of the role that assertion plays in deference are rarer. Moreover, most of the scholarship on deference and assertion, and on women’s letter writing in general, is based on the writing of the elite, which the Foundling mothers certainly are not. The Foundling Letters are

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6 The Foundling Asylum kept records of infants’ entrance into the institution, but those records focused on the child’s health and baptism rather than the parents or the circumstances of the child’s birth (Walsh; McKeown and Brown).
thus examples of everyday writing, or that which is written outside academic and professional contexts by ordinary people, typically those who are neither literarily nor historically significant. Theories of everyday writing contend that such writing, while often seen as ephemeral and discardable, both constitutes and represents social literacy practices that people use to shape and make sense of their lives and relationships (Lyons; Lillis; Barton and Hall; Sinor; Bazerman). The Foundling mothers, in constructing maternal and respectable selves, use their letters to shape and make sense of their lives and relationships. Theories of everyday writing, then, provide guidance in accounting for the ordinariness and everydayness of both the Foundling mothers and their writing.

Using each of these elements – the three interwoven stories; scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; and theories of everyday writing—this dissertation analyzes the Foundling Letters in order to answer four research questions:

- What are the rhetorical appeals and linguistic moves used by the Foundling mothers in constructing maternal and respectable selves?
- What role does assertion play in deference?
- How does the dynamic movement between deference and assertion function as a rhetorical strategy?
- What can the Foundling Letters, as a corpus, tell us about how women use writing in their everyday lives?

In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce this project’s major components. I begin by defining the major theoretical concepts, as briefly introduced above, that shape my analysis of the Foundling Letters, specifically the three stories, scholarship on deference and assertion, and theories of everyday writing. Next, I outline the project’s exigencies and contributions to Rhetoric and Composition. Finally, I conclude with chapter summaries.
1.2 Major Theoretical Concepts

In working with the Foundling Letters, I am guided by three interrelated theoretical concepts: 1) the three stories, that of single, working mothers in 19th century New York City, of the Foundling Asylum, and of the Foundling mothers; 2) rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; and 3) everyday writing. In this section, I briefly define each concept and its role in this project.

1.2.1 Three Stories

New York City of the mid-19th century was not kind to single, working mothers. Most lived in abject poverty, sleeping 5-10 to a room, inhabiting apartments with rotten, molding floors (Philopedos), and working countless hours in airless, dimly lit rooms (Stansell). Avenues of employment open to women were limited, and most women worked as domestic servants, seamstresses, and factory piece workers7 (Stansell; Gordon). While domestic servants could earn a living wage, such work required women to live in the homes of their employers where an infant would be unwelcome8 (Stansell; Miller). Seamstresses and piece workers may have had more freedom than did domestic servants, but work was inconsistent and wages were low (Stansell; Gordon). At a time when a workingman would struggle to support a family on $600 a year, women working full-time as seamstresses, an occupation mentioned in the letters of several Foundling mothers, could expect to earn at best $91 a year, assuming steady employment that few seamstresses enjoyed (Stansell; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; “Tight Times”). In such

7 Because of the lack of space in New York City, there were none of the large factories seen in other parts of the country. Instead, manufacturing work was dispersed to multiple small sites or farmed out to women in their homes who were paid according to the number of pieces they could produce (Stansell).

8 When domestic servants chose to keep their infants, the children were usually sent to a nurse who would care for the child for a fee and who also cared for a number of other children (Miller).
conditions, feeding and sheltering oneself was a difficult task, let alone doing the same for an infant whose care would have required time away from work.

If Victorian New York was economically unkind to poor, single working mothers, it was downright cruel socially. Poverty, in the minds of the Protestant, middle-class reformers who flooded the city’s charitable organizations and seats of power, was a moral shortcoming; poverty meant laziness, drunkenness, degradation, and sexual immorality (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Stansell). Interwoven with such views of poverty was an abhorrence of pre- and extra-marital female sexuality. Because all foundling children were presumed illegitimate, although this was not always the case, their mothers were presumed ‘ruined’ or ‘fallen’ no matter their actual marital status. To be “ruined meant to be less than physically perfect, to be non-virginal,” but it “also suggested something about the future,” about stunted potential economic, marital, and social opportunities (Brumberg 250). To have fallen was to be utterly destroyed.

The fallen woman—a popular figure in texts of the period from religious and reform tracts to newspaper editorials to novels—was, as described by the Foundling Asylum’s reporting and promotional materials, a “poor girl led away by intrigue or even willfully straying from virtue” (Sisters of Charity Report (1871) 4) who as a result found herself on a devastating spiral of self-destruction, prostitution, and eventually infanticide and even suicide (Sisters of Charity Third Annual Report; Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). While Protestant reformers reacted to the poor ruined or fallen woman with paternalism and strict moral judgment, in the Irish Catholic community, to which the majority of Foundling mothers belonged (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Gordon), social penalties were even more severe. Chastity and selflessness were desirable, if not the most desirable, qualities in young Irish women, and so “women who had sexual relations and children outside of marriage” were “consistently shunned and ostracized”
(Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion* 67). Historian Maureen Fitzgerald, in her study of the role of Irish Catholic nuns in New York City’s 19th century welfare system, describes such ostracism as a “social death” at a time when poverty made community necessary for survival (*Habits of Compassion* 68).

The Foundling Asylum arose in the midst of such poverty and sexual stigma. After the Civil War, New York City experienced an increase in abandoned and/or murdered infants (Sisters of Charity; Connelly; Miller; Gordon; Campbell). Historian Julie Miller, in her work on foundling infants in antebellum New York City, attributes this surge to a network of concurrent social issues, including an influx of soldiers and immigrants after the war, extreme poverty that forced many women to work outside the home, a lack of child care for working mothers, and the social stigma surrounding illegitimate births and pre-marital sex. These issues were compounded by a dearth of institutions able and willing to care for unwanted children and infants (Miller 47). Traditional orphanages refused to admit foundlings, citing both social and practical reasons. Foundlings were presumed illegitimate, and the stigma toward illegitimacy and the illicit sexuality it represented made orphanages leery of allowing respectable, legitimate children and shameful, illegitimate children to comingle or enjoy a similar status (Miller 70). In addition, from a practical standpoint, motherless infants were difficult to care for. Infant mortality rates were already high, especially in the summer months, as infants were particularly vulnerable to diseases (Miller 65), and maintaining an adequate supply of breastmilk was both difficult and costly9 (Miller 47). Further, many orphanages operated on a mix of public funds

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9 There was not, during the 19th century, a viable alternative to breast milk (Miller 65). Children who could not be breast fed could be dry nursed—at the Foundling Asylum, dry named infants were spoon fed condensed milk (Sisters of Charity Report (1871) 8)—but dry nursing practices could not provide adequate nutrition (Miller 65-66). Further, dry nursing implements, typically bottles, spoons, and rags, as well as water and the milk itself, were difficult to sterilize (Miller 66). Most dry nurses children were sickly, making them even more vulnerable to disease, and often died of malnutrition (Creagh “Benevolent Leverage” 53; Miller 66).
and private donations, and the presence of illegitimate children and the potential for high institutional mortality rates put those funds in jeopardy (Miller 48).

And so, increasing numbers of infants were found on the steps of churches, on the stoops of upper-class homes, or just in streets, exposed to the elements (Miller; Sisters of Charity; Connelly; Campbell). Prior to the establishment of foundling homes in the late 1860s, children who were found alive were taken to almshouses, where they did not fare much better (Miller). The almshouses, overcrowded and filthy, were simply ill-equipped to care for infants. As a result, 85 percent of infants in the care of the almshouses died within their first year (Miller 7). With thousands of infants dying each year, the city of New York, together with several religious and community organizations, formed a series of committees dedicated to creating institutions to care for them (Miller 85-87; Creagh “Faith in Fostering” 8-9; Oates), of which the Foundling Asylum was one.

The Foundling Asylum’s formal opening date was set for January 1, 1870; however, as soon as the Sisters secured a building in October of 1869, mothers began leaving infants in their care (Sisters of Charity; Miller 137; Walsh). The Foundling Asylum’s policy was a simple one: the Sisters welcomed any child, regardless of the circumstances of its birth, its health, or its race10 (Connolly 184; “In The Foundling Asylum” 2; Sisters of Charity Third Annual Report 8). When mothers brought children to the Foundling Asylum, they typically spoke with the institution’s director Sister Irene or her second in command Sister Theresa Vincent (Walsh; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). The goal of these conversations was not only to gather

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10 Although several foundling institutions opened in the 1860s and 1870s, the Foundling Asylum was the only one to accept children deemed to be in poor health or children of color (Connelly 182). Because I do not have access to any of the children’s personal records and because information about the mothers’ race was not typically recorded, I cannot speak to the race of any of the 17 Foundling mothers studied in this dissertation or that of their children.
information about the child’s health and baptism, but also to persuade the mother to remain at the
Foundling Asylum with her child for at least three to six months (Walsh; Sisters of Charity;
Connelly). The Sisters wished mothers to remain with their children for two reasons. The first
was practical, as the mother could nurse her infant and, in exchange for room and board, one
other foundling whose mother was unable to remain, which would prevent the institution from
needing to hire a nurse and would increase the infants’ chances of survival (Walsh; Connelly).
The second was spiritual, as the Sisters hoped that the Foundling Asylum could serve as a refuge
for women “mourning their lapse, and schooling and strengthening themselves in the practice
and ways of virtue, that they may never fall again as they journey on in the path of life” (Sisters
of Charity Third Annual Report 6).

While the stories of single, working mothers in 19th century New York City and of the
Foundling Asylum as presented here are well documented, the stories of the Foundling mothers
as individuals are not. Part of the Sisters’ mission was to provide Foundling mothers with
economic and social relief that would allow them productive and virtuous futures without the
economic burden of a child whose care they simply could not afford and, particularly, without
the social stigma of illegitimacy (Walsh; Sisters of Charity). Recording the details of the
Foundling mothers’ economic and sexual histories seemed to Sister Irene to work against that
purpose (Walsh; Oates), and so such details were rarely recorded11. For some children, mothers' names were not even recorded (Gordon 7)12. Thus, what remains of the Foundling mothers’ stories is the content of their letters, rendered in their own words and their own voices.

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11 The Foundling Asylum did not begin to keep such records until 1917 after they finally lost a long political battle with the City of New York that compelled them to “allow an outside social worker to investigate their clients” and to “keep legal records of children and mothers” (McKeown and Brown 94).
12 The children’s records are part of the NYHS’ Foundling Hospital collection, but are restricted.
1.2.2 Rhetorical Strategies of Deference and Assertion

The Foundling mothers, in their letters, use those words and voices to petition for the care of their children and to argue their worth as mothers and women, primarily through the balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Rhetorical strategies of deference are appeals to some kind of perceived inferiority, be that inferiority based on gender, class, culture, or religion (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay); strategies of assertion, in contrast, are refutations of inferiority and/or appeals to equality. Strategies of deference figure prominently in analyses of women’s writing, particularly women’s letter writing, in multiple periods of history from the Early Modern period to the Victorian era to the Depression, and such analyses illustrate that strategies of deference can take many forms. James Daybell, for example, in his work with Early Modern English female letters writers, cites the appeal to tropes of feminine weakness and fragility as a common deferent strategy. Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay\textsuperscript{13} offer another deferent strategy in their groundbreaking work on the writing of Renaissance women: couching, or the appeal to “distinct gender roles” such as the authority of motherhood or a “seeming…accept[ance of] the ‘weakness’ of their sex” in order to disguise or make more palatable arguments that a skeptical audience may find objectionable (53). Strategies of deference are also seen in writing outside the English-speaking world. Sheila Fitzpatrick, in a study of letters of petition written in Soviet Russia in the 1930s\textsuperscript{14}, identifies as a strategy of deference the composing of subject positions that emphasize powerlessness in order to gain the sympathy and cooperation of a more powerful audience. Such rhetorical strategies,

\textsuperscript{13} While Tebeaux and Lay may not seem to be the most obvious scholars to use in discussing deference as a rhetorical strategy in women’s letter writing, I include them here because they offer one of the most concise and coherent definitions of couching, a strategy that is widely used among women in academic, professional, and everyday writing.

\textsuperscript{14} While Fitzpatrick’s letter writers are both male and female, she does note that male authors are less likely than female to appeal to their own helplessness or weakness (98).
although not always labeled as deferent by the scholars who study them, read as forms of deference because each strategy is predicated on the unequal relationship the author constructs between herself and her audience. Thus, the Early Modern letter writers studied by James Daybell, by appealing to female weakness and fragility, imply that they are emotionally and physically inferior to their typically male addressees. The writers analyzed by Tebeaux and Lay do much the same; for example, in the act of reassuring her audience that women should “stay in second place,” Dorothy Leigh in her *Mother’s Blessing*, one of several texts analyzed by Tebeaux and Lay, acknowledges her inferiority to her primarily male audience and gives them authority (73). Finally, in emphasizing their powerlessness, Fitzpatrick’s letter writers imply that they are inferior to the male Soviet leaders they address. The use of strategies of deference implies, in other words, a power imbalance between author and audience because the author places herself in a position of inferiority in order to fulfill her rhetorical goals.

Strategies of deference are, though, just that: rhetorical strategies. As Daybell points out, female letter writers were skillful in their use deference (4) to construct a relationship with their audience that furthered their arguments and rhetorical goals. One such Early Modern letter writer, Mary Throckmorton, wrote to her father describing a letter of petition she had written to a nobleman: “I haue answered his letter like a woman very submissively if that will serve for I perceive that they do not indure to be tolde of theyr faults/ nether can I abide any wronge but I must make it knowne to them” (15). For Throckmorton, writing like a woman—or like her addressee believed a woman would write—is a clear and deliberate rhetorical strategy. In other words, while the hardships described by Daybell’s Early Modern writers, Tebeaux and Lay’s Renaissance women, and Fitzpatrick’s Soviet letter writers—and by the Foundling mothers—undoubtedly reflect their realities, their writing also involves an element of rhetorical
performance. Further, the female authors discussed by Daybell, Tebeaux and Lay, and Fitzpatrick wrote within specific social contexts, and particularly hierarchical ones, so it is important to note that deference as a rhetorical strategy operates based on both gender and class assumptions (Daybell; Sonmez; Wall). Early Modern female letter writers were more likely, for example, to defer to men of higher or equivalent social standing than to men of lower social standing (Sonmez; Wall); in fact, Early Modern female letter writers could be quite assertive with male addressees who were perceived as socially and particularly economically inferior to them (Wall). Female letter writers also used deference as a rhetorical strategy when writing to other women, particularly those of a higher social standing; however, that deference was less likely to take the form of appeals to feminine fragility or helplessness (Wall). Gender, in other words, is not the only factor that influences the use of deference as a rhetorical strategy.¹⁵

For the Foundling mothers in particular, deference was embedded not just in gender assumptions, but in assumptions about class, religion, and morality. In writing to the Sisters of Charity who ran the Foundling Asylum—a group of nuns whose position afforded them more power in the community than the Foundling mothers and who represented not just the institution of the Catholic Church but also the chastity, selflessness, and morality to which a good Catholic woman should aspire—the Foundling mothers defer along multiple axes, but they also assert. When assertion is discussed in studies of deference, however, it is usually approached as the absence of deference rather than as a strategy in its own right. For example, historian Alison Wall, in her study of letters written between an Early Modern aristocratic woman and her

¹⁵ However, gender cannot also be discounted, as many of the strategies that women use to defer are based on gendered conceptions of women and are different from strategies of deference used by men. Men are more likely to defer by appealing to social or economic hierarchies or through flattery than by appealing to weakness or fragility (Whyman; Daybell).
daughter-in-law, identifies letters that are deferent and letters that are not deferent, but because she uses the non-deferent letters to define deference, she does not spend much time analyzing how assertion functions within the deferent letters and vice versa. In this dissertation, I will explore the role that assertion plays in deference, specifically focusing on how the Foundling mothers construct maternal and respectable selves through the balance of or dynamic movement between deference and assertion.

1.2.3 Everyday Writing

Scholarly studies of deference, while they provide a strong base from which to build a discussion about how the Foundling mothers balance deference and assertion, are primarily based on the writing of the elite. The Foundling mothers, however, are not elite; thus, theories of everyday writing provide guidance in analyzing and valuing the everyday nature of both the Foundling Letters as texts and the Foundling mothers as authors.

Everyday writing is that which is written by ordinary people outside academic and professional contexts; although created for a range of rhetorical purposes, everyday writing serves to construct, organize, and make sense of lives, relationships, and selves (Lyons; Lillis; Barton and Hall; Sinor; Bazerman). Writing that can be defined as everyday thus shares several characteristics. The first is that everyday writing is written by ordinary people, typically those who are neither historically or literarily significant (Sinor; Lillis; Henkin). While Rhetoric and Composition, Literature, Women’s Studies, History, and related fields have studied extensively the letters, diaries, and personal papers of famous authors, politicians, and historical figures, such texts are not typically the focus of everyday writing; instead, everyday writing studies texts written by the non-famous and non-elite, arguing that such texts, and by extension such people,
hold just as much value. This sense of ordinariness is important not just in regard to the authors of everyday texts, but also in regard to their context, as a second defining characteristic of everyday writing is that it is composed outside of academic and professional contexts (Lillis). David Barton and Mary Hamilton, whose work on the social construction of literacy practices influences much work in everyday writing, argue that “there are different literacy practices associated with different domains of life,” or “structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned” such as the home, the classroom, or the workplace (11). Even where there is crossover between domains, literacy practices are still “supported, learned, and carried out in different ways” depending upon the domain (11). A literacy practice like letter writing, for example, will differ in both form and content in the home domain and the workplace domain because personal and professional letters fulfill and are driven by different types of needs (Barton and Hall; Barton and Hamilton; Lillis; Bazerman).

The specifics of authors’ everyday needs vary but, as a whole, authors use everyday writing to construct lives, selves, and relationships, another significant characteristic of everyday writing. For Jennifer Sinor, everyday writing is the means through which individuals use literacy to construct themselves, a claim which she both derives from and applies to diaries. In her book, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing*, Sinor describes the ways in which her great-aunt Annie Ray uses a diary to organize and make sense of her life and by extension her identity as a 19th century woman. Annie Ray’s primary rhetorical strategy is that of parataxis, or “the placing of words together without the use of conjunctions” (156), a strategy that “denies privilege and hierarchy” (157). In other words, no element of Annie’s diary entries, and thus no element of her life, becomes any more notable than the others, allowing Annie Ray to make orderly the more difficult parts of her life. Using parataxis, Annie orders in all of the elements that make up a
woman’s life—her work around the house, her help on the homestead, her attempts to conceive children—and orders out or diminishes those elements that do not fit the narrative of who a 19\textsuperscript{th} century woman should be—her dissatisfaction with her life, her sense of loneliness, her pain over her husband’s infidelities (188). Annie Ray, then, uses her diary to compose a self that makes orderly and livable what Sinor’s analysis reveals to be a rather disorderly and lonely life.

Everyday writing, while it serves as a means to construct lives, selves, and relationships, is itself socially constructed. Like all literacy practices, everyday writing is influenced by social institutions and power relationships (Barton and Hamilton; Powell; Hauser and McClellan). Barton and Hamilton, in their discussion of the social construction of literacy, argue that “socially powerful institutions tend to support dominant literacy practices…[or] institutionalized configurations of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships” (12). An example of such support can be seen in Katrina Powell’s work with letters written by residents of the Shenandoah National Park (SNP) in the 1930’s. In brief, the lands that now make up the park had been seized by the federal government, which meant that, for those residents who had yet to be relocated, activities like “harvesting crops…. grazing cattle, or collecting wood for heating their homes…became regulated,” if even permitted, by the federal government (3). Residents were thus required to write letters in order to request “permission to continue their routine living” (3), but their letters, Powell notes, served multiple purposes; while the letters did request permission to work on the land, they also pushed back against the dominant narrative government agencies had perpetuated about residents. In their bid to create the SNP and manage the land, the government had composed a “monolithic discourse” about the residents that did not necessarily include the voices of the residents (7). This monolithic discourse was composed through a network of literacy practices, including government-published brochures and
informational material about the SNP; internal memos, letters, and other documents; and newspaper articles. This network of practices both shaped and conformed to the dominant opinion about the residents, the one necessary to facilitate seizing their homes to create the SNP: the “mountain families were all poor, illiterate, and ill-suited to make decisions for themselves” (9). In order to be successful in their petitions for assistance and permissions, the mountain families had to contend with, or at least give the appearance of acknowledging, the dominant discourse about them. Thus, their writing had to situate itself among this larger discourse of power in order for the authors to fulfil their rhetorical goals.

The mountain residents’ multiplicity of rhetorical goals illustrates the final characteristic of everyday writing discussed here16, which I again take from Barton and Hamilton’s discussion of the social construction of literacy practices: “literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals” (12). “Any study of literacy practices,” write Barton and Hamilton, “must therefore situate reading and writing activities in these broader contexts and motivations for use” (12). In other words, everyday writing can be read as a means to an end, as a way to accomplish a goal. Considering the motivations for a piece of everyday writing can illuminate its value beyond sentimentality and historical interest; more important, it encourages a generosity toward the composer that is vital to a study of everyday writing given that such generosity positions the composer as an agent. Reading with a generous view toward the authors of everyday day writing is particularly important when that writing is composed by a population not usually seen as rhetorically sophisticated (Sinor; Lyons; Austin). This importance is illustrated by Frances Austin in her work with the Clift family archive of letters written, at least in part, by a

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16 While there are other important characteristics of everyday writing—for example its ephemeral and discardable nature and the uncomfortable balance it strikes between the everyday and the exceptional—those characteristics will be discussed in a fuller review of everyday writing in chapter two.
working-class Cornish family in the late 18th century. Austin refutes misconceptions about letter writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, specifically that literacy was not common among working-class people and that letter writing was not a regular part of their lives (43-44), by analyzing letters written between the six Clift siblings. While Austin’s reporting of the number and type of letters included in the Clift archive reveals that working-class families regularly wrote to each other, as well as to friends and more distant relatives, her generous rhetorical reading of those letters illustrates that their writing accomplished complicated social goals: “[the Clifts] gossip; they complain of one another’s behaviour; they confide their worries and occasionally ask for advice; they commission each other to do things; and they discuss various matters, including religion, with great fervor” (58). In other words, their letters serve a range of rhetorical purposes that, when read in the context of those purposes, cast the Clifts as agents and as rhetors. Thus, taking my lead from Barton and Hamilton, Powell, and Austin, I approach the Foundling mothers as agents and their writing as working toward both personal and social goals. In petitioning for their children’s care and particularly in arguing for their own maternity and respectability, the Foundling mothers act as agents who purposefully use rhetoric, which is all the more valuable given how little is often expected of them.

In sum, these three interrelated concepts, the three stories—those of single, working mothers in 19th century New York City, of the Foundling Asylum, and of the Foundling mothers as individuals—rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; and theories of everyday writing, guide my analysis of the Foundling Letters. I have provided only brief definitions in this chapter, but a more thorough literature review of each concept can be found in later chapters.
1.3 Exigencies and Contributions

Before providing the summaries for each chapter, I would like to briefly outline the contributions that this dissertation, in which I analyze the ways in which 17 Foundling mothers balance strategies of deference and assertion to compose maternal and respectable selves, makes to Rhetoric and Composition; they are threefold. First, because everyday writing is a relatively new area of study in Rhetoric and Composition, my project contributes to its disciplinary portrait of the multiple ways that ordinary and non-elite people use writing, including to maintain relationships, organize and make sense of their lives, and compose their realities. That disciplinary portrait is still taking shape, as everyday writing is just beginning to coalesce into a cohesive theory and field of study. In composing this project, I bring together concepts that I see repeated across studies of everyday writing in hopes of contributing to that future cohesiveness. In particular, my analysis of the Foundling Letters presents a methodology that future scholars may find useful in their studies of everyday writing, particularly archived everyday writing. In sum, this dissertation expands the field’s disciplinary portrait of how everyday writing functions and can be studied.

Second, while this project’s analysis of the Foundling Letters contributes to Rhetoric and Composition's disciplinary portrait of everyday writing generally, it also works to expand the field’s understanding of how deference and assertion function as rhetorical strategies. While deference as a rhetorical strategy stretches across scholarship about women’s everyday writing, particularly women’s letter writing (Daybell; Tebeaux and Lay; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez; Fitzpatrick) and informs my analysis of the Foundling Letters, it does not speak to the specific

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17 It is typical, in outlining exigencies and contributions, to also identify the study's limitations; however, because those limitations are associated with sample selection and there is not room here to review the entire selection process, I will identify limitations in chapter two when I discuss the sample and methods.
focus of this project, which traces how the *balance between* deference and assertion functions as a rhetorical strategy. The role that assertion plays in deference has not been widely studied, and this dissertation works to elucidate that role and the importance of the ways in which assertion and deference work in tandem. Working toward a rich and nuanced understanding of how deference functions as a rhetorical strategy is important because of its consistent presence in women’s everyday writing across history. Early Modern letters (Daybell; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez), Victorian letters like the Foundling Letters, and 20th century letters (Fitzpatrick; Powell) have all been found to use deferent strategies. Further, women use deferent strategies differently and more frequently than do men (Daybell; Sonmez; Fitzpatrick). In other words, because so many women across so many rhetorical situations use deference as a rhetorical strategy and because there are specific strategies of deference that are used predominantly by women, deference appears to be important to women’s ways of writing and knowing and thus worthy of study. So far, deference as a rhetorical strategy has been widely studied in History and in Women’s Studies, but has yet to be studied extensively in Rhetoric and Composition, a task that I engage in this project.

Finally, the Foundling mothers, as poor, working-class women, represent an understudied population. Scholars have mapped the historical and rhetorical dimensions of women’s everyday writing, and particularly women’s letter writing; however, to date that work has tended to focus on upper- and middle-class women, largely because of class issues: 1) letter writing was seen as a significant marker of upper- and middle-class status and identity, and so discourse about letter writing was often composed and distributed by and for the upper and middle classes; and 2) the letters of such women were more likely to have been valued and thus preserved (Daybell; Barton and Hall; Austin). Studies of the writing composed by working-class and poor women are much
rarer, not because they necessarily wrote less but, at least in part, because that writing was less likely to be preserved (Austin). The Foundling Letters were written by working class rather than upper- or middle- class women; therefore, these letters represent an important opportunity to study the rhetoric of working-class women and to enrich the field’s knowledge of how *women* more generally, not just upper- or middle- class women, used rhetoric. Moreover, my analysis suggests that, contrary to the myth that poor, working-class people, especially women, either did not compose or did not compose well (Austin; Powell), the authors of the Founding Letters write with a rhetorical sophistication that is all the more remarkable in light of their heartbreaking, complicated exigencies.

### 1.4 Chapter Summaries

Before the chapter summaries, a brief preface is necessary, as this dissertation employs a rather unconventional, braided overarching organization. My analysis of the Foundling Letters draws on three theoretical concepts, each of which needs a detailed, nuanced literature review that focuses on its connection to the other two concepts, to the Foundling Letters, and to my method of analysis. Using a more traditional organization—with all three literature reviews in chapter two, a discussion of methods and sample selection in chapter three, an analysis of the letters in chapters four and five, and a conclusion in chapter six—works again this sense of connectedness. The traditional organization frontloads all of the contextual information and relegates the letters to the second half of the dissertation, effectively separating the two and minimizing the connections between them. These connections provide depth to my analysis and are necessary to understand the Foundling mothers’ use of rhetoric. Thus, I have eschewed the
traditional literature review and methods chapter organization characteristic of many dissertations in favor of one that allows me to foreground those connections.

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters. In this first chapter, I have introduced the project. I began by introducing the Founding Letters and outlining my research questions. Next, I briefly defined the three theoretical concepts that shape my analysis of the Foundling Letters: the three stories, rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion, and theories of everyday writing. Then, I discussed the project’s exigencies and contributions and concluded with chapter summaries.

In chapter two, I explore the Foundling Letters as artifacts. First, I focus on their origins by providing a literature review of the three stories—of single, working mothers in Victorian New York City, of the Foundling Asylum, and of the Foundling mothers—that outline the rhetorical situation in which the Foundling Letters were composed. Then, I describe the Foundling Letters as I encountered them in the New York Historical Society archives by outlining the sample selection process for this dissertation. Finally, I focus on the Foundling Letters as artifacts for analysis by providing a literature review of everyday writing.

Chapter three identifies and examines the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used in the Foundling Letters. I begin by providing a literature review of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Then, I look across the 17 Foundling Letters that make up this dissertation’s sample to identify and analyze the strategies used by the Foundling mothers, exploring how these deferent and/or assertive strategies function individually before discussing the dynamic movement between them in chapters four and five.

Chapters four and five share a similar structure in which I analyze the ways in which the Foundling mothers use the strategies identified in chapter three to compose maternal and
respectable selves respectively. In chapter four, I analyze three Foundling Letters in order to illustrate the ways in which three Foundling mothers balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to both petition for their children’s care and argue for their worth as mothers. Chapter five focuses on three additional Foundling Letters as I analyze the ways in which the Foundling mothers again balance deference and assertion to compose respectable selves and argue for their worth as women.

Finally, chapter six functions as a conclusion in which I review the implications of my analyses of the Foundling Letters. Specifically, I identify what the analyses indicate about rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion and women’s everyday writing, and I raise questions for additional research.
CHAPTER TWO

“PLEASE KEEP THIS RECORD”: THE FOUNDLING LETTER AS ARTIFACT

2.1 Introduction

On September 14, 1870, two-week-old Harry Babcock was surrendered to the New York Foundling Asylum along with a note:

*This Babe. Harry S. Babcock, was born Aug 28th 1870. I leave it to your tender mercies and care. Please keep this record. From Its Mother*

Both Its Mother’s request that her son Harry be cared for and her request that her letter be kept as record were honored by the Sisters of Charity of New York, the Catholic order of nuns who founded and administered the Foundling Asylum. Unfortunately, the letter is the only source of information available about Its Mother. In order to protect the reputations and the futures of their Foundling mothers and children, the Sisters of Charity did not keep records detailing the mothers’ identities, their

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18 Throughout this dissertation, the Foundling mothers are, where possible, addressed by the names with which they signed their letters. Further, I have reproduced these names as they were written. Its Mother has capitalized her name, and so I have reproduced her capitalizations. Other mothers did not capitalize their names, and so I have transcribed them in lower case. More information about mother’s names can be found in chapter three.
personal situations, or the circumstances of their children’s births (Walsh); the only information known about the Foundling mothers is what they chose to disclose in their letters.\(^{19}\)

Thus, an analysis of the Foundling Letters must begin with an examination of the Letters as artifacts, and this chapter approaches the Foundling Letters as artifacts in three ways. First, I identify the origins or context of the Foundling Letters by narrating three stories that inform the Letters’ larger rhetorical situations: the social and economic realities faced by poor, working mothers in late 19th century New York City, the history and policies of the Foundling Asylum as an institution, and the experiences of the Foundling mothers as individuals. These stories represent the Foundling Letters’ rhetorical situations and thus inform my analysis of them. Second, I discuss the Foundling Letters as historical and material artifacts as I encountered them in the archives of the New York Historical Society (NYHS). The Foundling Letters are a corpus of approximately 1000 letters that are part of a larger Foundling Hospital collection that includes photos, administrative records, and promotional materials. In this section, I detail how the letters are archived, explain how those archival methods influence my analysis of the Foundling Letters, and elucidate the selection criteria for this dissertation’s 17-letter sample. Finally, I situate the Foundling Letters as artifacts of everyday writing, or writing that is composed by ordinary, non-elite people in order to maintain relationships and make sense of their everyday lives (Lillis; Sinor; Lyons; Barton and Hamilton; Powell). Theories of everyday writing allow me to address the ordinariness of the Foundling Letters, as they are written by poor, working mothers who are decidedly non-elite. This ordinariness is particularly important, as scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion\(^{20}\), the major rhetorical strategy used in the Foundling

\(^{19}\) The recordkeeping practices of the Foundling Asylum are discussed in detail in sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3 of this chapter.

\(^{20}\) The literature review for rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion can be found in chapter three.
Letters, is focused primarily on the writing of elite women. In sum, this chapter examines the Foundling Letters as rhetorical, historical, and everyday artifacts, providing the necessary context for my analysis.

2.2 Three Stories

An exploration of the Foundling Letters’ contexts is complicated by the Foundling mothers’ relative anonymity. The only source of information available about the Foundling mothers as individuals is the Foundling Letters themselves. Some Foundling mothers chose to disclose quite a bit of information in their letters. Mrs. Cooper, whose letter opened the first chapter and will be analyzed in detail in chapter five, discusses the circumstances of her son Walter’s birth, her marital status, and the number of children she has. Other Foundling mothers, like It’s Mother, chose to disclose comparatively little about themselves. Still, the personal information that the Foundling mothers did choose to share in their letters establishes a common narrative: the mothers were predominantly single, they were among the working poor, and they were acutely aware of the social and religious stigma they faced for their perceived illicit sexuality. Given this common narrative, which constitutes the Foundling mothers’ larger rhetorical situation, I examine social and economic situations that the mothers shared as single, working mothers in late 19th century New York City who made the heartbreaking decision to surrender their infants to the Foundling Asylum. I have organized their shared social and economic situations as three stories. First, I narrate the economic and social experiences of single, working mothers in Victorian New York City, discussing both their economic hardships and the social stigma they faced as presumed fallen women. Second, I outline the story of the Foundling Asylum as an institution, focusing on both its history and its policies toward mothers.
Finally, I review the Foundling’s record keeping policies in order to outline the little that can be inferred about the Foundling Mothers as individuals.

2.2.1 Single, Working Mothers in Victorian New York City

The first of the three stories that inform the larger rhetorical situation within which the Foundling mothers wrote is that of single, working mothers in Victorian New York City. Their story was primarily shaped by two significant social forces: 1) the reality of and reform attitudes toward the poverty in which they lived and 2) the social and religious stigma surrounding illicit sex and illegitimate births (Stansell; Gilje; Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). Within these social, material, and discursive forces, economics, class, religion, and gender intersected to create a set of assumptions that the Foundling mothers both defer to and assert against in arguing for their own worth as mothers and as women.

Within their letters, both those analyzed in this dissertation and in the larger 1000-letter corpus, Foundling mothers provide a variety of reasons why they chose to surrender their children—desertion by a husband or lover who could have provided financial support, a lack of family or friends to care for the infant while the mother works to support him or her, the inability to find or keep work or permanent housing—but poverty is the common thread among their situations (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Gordon; Gilje). In the late 19th century, employment opportunities for women were limited in both the type and number of positions available (Stansell; Gordon; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Miller); the only work considered suitable for women was that which mimicked the domestic work traditionally performed by

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21 Both the makeup of and connection between the full corpus and this dissertation’s sample and the selection criteria for that sample are discussed in detail in section 2.3 of this chapter.
women in the home. As Christine Stansell argues in her landmark study of women’s working conditions in 18th and 19th century New York City, the doctrine of separate spheres was just as active in the workplace as in the home; thus, the majority of working women were employed as domestics (i.e. maids, nannies, and cooks), seamstresses, or the makers of small household goods such as artificial flowers or tassels (Stansell). Just as women’s work was often devalued in the home, it was also devalued in the workplace; women who worked in sewing and manufacturing were considered “unskilled,” as they worked piecemeal on tasks—such as sewing cuffs on shirts or braiding threads for decorative tassels—that were considered beneath trained male tailors and artisans (Stansell 107). Such women workers, who were employed in the ‘outside system,’ would visit a tailor’s or manufacturer’s shop each day, pick up the shirts to be sewed or the threads to be braided, complete their work at home, and then return their finished work to the shop to be paid based on how much they had completed (Stansell 106). Shops gave out as much work as they had, but there was often insufficient work for all of the women looking for employment and the amount of work was inconsistent (Stansell 110-115). Manufacturing and sewing work was seasonal and unpredictable; thus, it was not uncommon for women to be out of work for several days or even several weeks. When there was work to be had, there was often so much of it that hours of backbreaking labor were required to meet an employer’s demands (Stansell 110-115).

22 My discussion of women’s labor conditions relies heavily on Stansell’s work, as Women in the City is the formative text for the working conditions of women in New York City in the 18th and 19th centuries. The majority of this dissertation’s secondary sources about the Foundling Asylum, foundlings, and the social conditions faced by single mothers cite Stansell in their discussion of working conditions.

23 Seamstress here means someone who worked on small piecemeal tasks. For the middle and working classes, the making of women’s dresses was just beginning to move from the home to the factory; in the mid-19th century only difficult to tailor men’s clothes were made outside the home (Stansell 107-108).
Although women’s sewing and manufacturing work was unsteady and devalued, competition for it was fierce. An influx of immigrants, particularly young women from Ireland and those migrating from rural areas, flooded the New York labor market (Stansell; Miller; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage”). This increase in available workers, coupled with the unskilled nature of their work and changes in the textile and manufacturing markets, drove wages down, often below the level of subsistence (Stansell; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; Miller). Women frequently worked 18-hour days bent over sewing tables in their filthy, dimly lit tenement homes in order to earn a fifth of what it might take to survive (Stansell; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; “Tight Times”). Thus, single, working women like the Foundling mothers found themselves in a situation in which work, when they were able to find it, required hours of exhausting labor for very little pay.

Single working mothers like the Foundling mothers thus faced dismal employment conditions and alternating overwork and lack of work, each at low pay; they also lived and performed much of that work in filthy, deplorable conditions in their homes. Philopedos, a doctor who worked in the tenement buildings of New York City and was an early advocate of children’s hospitals, described such conditions in 1852, noting that tenement homes were without ventilation, often overrun with mold and damp, and absent of light. In such conditions, people lived and worked 5-10 a room, passing around disease in a perpetual state of sickness. In 1860, one doctor “guessed that a thousand women a year died of causes related to sewing in the outside

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24 By 1850, the manufacturing of men’s clothing had moved out of the home and consumers were purchasing readymade clothes in increasing numbers. The majority of clothes made in New York were shipped south, taking advantage of the lucrative market for slave clothes. In other words, the textile industry was moving away from a model based on small, artisan-based shops and towards a model based on large outfits that employed thousands of at-home subcontractors, many of whom were women (Stansell 106-110).
system,” as “malnutrition, fatigue, cold and bad ventilation in the tenements bred pneumonia and consumption, the major killers of nineteenth-century cities” (Stansell 114).

Women who worked as domestics—maids, cooks, nannies—enjoyed steadier employment and better living conditions, but they likewise faced challenges in caring for their infants. Most female domestics lived in the homes of their employers, where an infant would not have been tolerated (Stansell; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*). Some mothers left their newborns with ‘baby farmers’ or women who took in, for a fee, the children of parents who could not care for them (Miller 67-68). The baby farming system was rife with corruption, as it was not unheard of for such women to neglect and even kill the infants in their charge (Miller 67-68). Further, pregnant domestics were often fired by their employers, as their conditions precluded them from a heavy workload and as, most importantly, they were seen as immoral, fallen women unfit to work in a respectable household (Stansell; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*).

Generally, whether working as a domestic or in the outside system, the working and living conditions women faced were often incompatible with the demands of caring for infants; mothers needed to work in order to make enough money to support their children, but the process of doing so meant that they had little time or money to actually provide care (Gilje). This difficulty is specifically referenced in several Foundling Letters, including a letter written by the mother of William Jackson: “please accept this poor babe whose poor mother is able to do nothing for it for as she is obliged to work out for her bread and is therefore unable to take care of it.” The mother of Catherine Betchind expresses a similar sentiment, writing “Sister you will pleas tack care of my Baby for i have no way of keeping it i have to hire out and try to pay for it.” Teresa Martin, after petitioning the Foundling Asylum in order to secure care for her infant,
decided to keep the child, but found that she was unable to provide for them both: “Three months ago, I went up to ask you if you would take my baby and you said you would but I thought I would take it for a few months and see how I could get along with her and now I see to my great sorrow that it is an impossibility for me to pay her board and my own beside my work is getting slack.” The economic conditions faced by single, working mothers in New York City were, thus, significant factors in both their decisions to surrender their children and in the arguments they made in their letters.

While the Foundling mothers’ poverty was a factor in their decisions to surrender their children, it is the social, discursive attitude toward this poverty to which the mothers defer and against which they assert in both petitioning for their children’s care and composing maternal and respectable selves. These social and discursive attitudes inspired and were shaped by a larger, mid-19th century movement to reform the poor of New York City. By the mid-19th century, the material conditions experienced by the working poor had become dire. The overcrowding of the tenements, problems with sanitation and spread of disease, and oversaturation of the labor market were significantly exacerbated by a massive influx of immigrants and of migrants from rural areas that began in the early 19th century (Creagh “Benevolent Leverage” 24; Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Stansell). Historian Dianne Creagh notes that between 1800 and 1860 “the population of New York grew by over 1,300 percent” (“Benevolent Leverage” 24). This sudden swell in population overwhelmed the institutions in place to “maintain social order and administer to the needs of [New York City] residents” (Meckel qtd in Creagh “Benevolent Leverage” 24). In response to the growing filth and chaos of New York’s poorest boroughs, the city’s charitable and religious groups organized
various efforts to help the poor, of which the Sisters of Charity and their Foundling Asylum were part.

These efforts, though, were not meant simply to relieve the poor but also to reform them, to provide them with a way out of poverty or to stamp out the behaviors responsible for that poverty. Such reform was decidedly religious in nature but varied according to the specific faith; thus, a conversation about the reform of the poor must be framed in terms of religion. This framing, while important to a discussion of the material and social conditions faced by single, working mothers in Victorian New York City, is complicated by the Foundling Letters themselves, as the religious affiliations of the 17 specific Foundling mothers whose letters are analyzed in this dissertation cannot be known. The Foundling Asylum did not record the mothers’ religions, so given that only one of the Foundling mothers specifies her religious affiliation—a Catholic who surrendered her child to the Foundling Asylum rather than allow the infant to be raised by the Protestant family who asked to adopt her—some calculated assumptions must be made. Thus, I have situated this conversation within Protestant and Catholic attitudes toward poverty for several reasons. The first reason has to do with the Foundling mothers’ probable religious affiliations. Secondary sources argue that the majority of the Foundling Asylum’s clientele was Catholic because 1) the institution itself was affiliated with the Catholic church and 2) the majority of poor, working women in late 19th century New York City—the people the Foundling Asylum was designed to save—were Catholic, particularly Irish Catholic (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Gordon; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage”). This claim, however, is contradicted by few primary sources, particularly newspaper articles designed to publicize the Foundling Asylum. For example, Daniel Connelly, in an article for Appleton’s Journal of Literature, Science, and Art dated August 17th, 1872,
estimates informally that “probably two-thirds of the children left at the Asylum are of non-Catholic parentage” (183). While this is a significant figure, Connelly also notes that “no questions are asked about a woman’s religion when she leaves a child” at that Foundling Asylum (183), casting some doubt on his assertion. Further, the Foundling Asylum had a financial interest in using the press to present the institution as saving women of all religions: the majority of the Asylum’s funding came from public funds that may have been jeopardized by the impression that the Foundling Asylum was used solely by Catholic women. So, while it is certain that the Foundling Asylum, one of the only infant homes to admit children without their mothers, was used by women of all faiths, it is likely that a significant percentage of those women were Catholic.

The second reason this conversation is situated within Protestant and Catholic attitudes about poverty is that the Protestant and Catholic churches were the major participants in the movement to reform New York City’s poor. Although secular organizations, as well as those tied to other faiths, did work to help the poor, their efforts did not occur on as large or systematic a scale as did those of the Protestants and Catholics (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Miller). Indeed, most scholarly texts approach the reform movement as a conflict between Protestant and Catholic forms of charity (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Creagh “Orphan Trains”; Fitzgerald “Perils”; McKeown and Brown; Miller). Thus, the larger social and discursive climate in which the Foundling mothers wrote their letters would have been significantly influenced by Protestant and Catholic faiths regardless of the mothers’ own religious affiliations. Both Protestant and Catholic reform efforts were driven by each religions’ larger views of poverty and sexuality, as illicit sex was seen as both a cause and consequence of poverty. Thus, an examination of the social and discursive attitudes faced by the Foundling mothers must begin with Protestant and
Catholic views on poverty and sexuality. First, I will address the divergent views that
Protestants and Catholics held on poverty. Then, I will discuss their shared abhorrence of the
fallen or sexually active single Victorian woman.

In the early and mid-19th century, the Protestant church “infused with religious
enthusiasm stimulated by the second great-awakening25” (Miller 9), concerned about the
staggering number of foreign and native-born immigrants that flooded the city, and appalled by
the material conditions of New York City’s poorest boroughs was a dominant force in the city’s
reform (Gordon; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Miller; Oates; Fitzgerald “Perils”; McKeown
and Brown; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage”). For middle-class Protestant reformers, poverty
was a moral shortcoming (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion 4); people were poor because they
were lazy and degenerate, qualities that were learned in their families and cultures, particularly
within Catholic families (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion 4; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage”
44). Within some Protestant circles, there was considerable anti-Catholic sentiment, as
Catholicism was viewed as “unreasonable, degenerate, and undemocratic” (Creagh “Benevolent
Leverage” 44). Alarmingly, from the Protestant perspective, the Catholic population was
increasing rapidly both in New York City and the country as whole, as many of the German and
Irish immigrants pouring into and through New York City were Catholic. Creagh estimates that
“in the early 1800s, Catholics in the United States were a small religious minority with fewer
than 200,000 adherents. By 1860, their numbers had ballooned to over three million, larger than
any single Protestant denomination” (“Benevolent Leverage” 26). From the Protestant view,

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25 The first decades of the 19th century saw a series of “emotionally charged” evangelical religious revivals that
triggered a nationwide campaign to transform American law and politics through the lens of evangelical
Christianity” (Stone 1307). In New York City, this “religious enthusiasm” inspired the creation of several religious
organizations designed to reform the poor, particularly poor children (Miller 9).
reforming the poor meant ridding them of the perceived laziness and immorality taught in Catholic homes by Catholic mothers.

Central to Protestant reform was the ideology of Protestant, Republican motherhood which held that the primary role of the mother was to teach and model for her children industriousness, piousness, and morality (Dye and Smith; Gilje). If the poor lacked these positive qualities, it was because their mothers either did not or were unable to teach them. Instead, Protestant reformers held, poor Catholic mothers taught their children to be shiftless, degenerate, and promiscuous, largely because that was the morality under which the mothers themselves were raised. Charles Loring Brace, a leader of the Protestant reform movement, describes the inadequacy of poor mothers, and particularly poor Catholic mothers, quite clearly:

The writer [Brace] knows of an instance in an almshouse in Western New York, where four generations of females were paupers and prostitutes...it is well known to those familiar with the criminal classes, that certain appetites or habits, if indulged abnormally and excessively through two or more generations, come to have an almost irresistible force, and, no doubt, modify the brain so as to constitute an almost insane condition. The is especially true of the appetite for liquor and of the sexual passion, and sometimes of the peculiar weakness, dependence, and laziness which make confirmed paupers. (43)

Poverty was thus tied to motherhood (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*) and the qualities mothers inculcated in their children. Given the role that motherhood played in the perpetuation of poverty, Protestant reformers “believed that the best strategy for eradicating [poverty] was to

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26 Although Brace does not specifically state that the “criminal classes” described in the quoted section are Catholic, he does so both directly and indirectly earlier in his book. For example, Brace writes that “as one looks at the moral condition of the Catholic poor, one can only sigh, that that once powerful body has lost so much of the inspiration of Christ which once filled it” (156). While Brace pays lip service to the idea that “it cannot be said that the Protestant poor proved much better than the Catholic,” his book contains few references to the Protestant poor in comparison to the Catholic and his specifically Catholic references are negative in character: “Among all the hundreds of families I knew and visited I never met but two that were Protestant. To all words of spiritual warning or help there came the chilling formalism of the ignorant Roman Catholic in reply, implying that certain outward acts made the soul right with the Creator” (154).
intervene in motherhood so as to alter the reproduction of moral traits associated with poverty” (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion* 3-4). As Brace’s comments imply, one of the most important traits that Protestant reformers sought to eradicate in the poor was sexuality. Poor women were viewed as naturally “more sexually passionate than middle-class women” (Ireland 96), a nature that Protestant reformers sought to deter.

Protestant interference in motherhood and reformation of the poor was accomplished in multiple ways depending upon the kind of charity deemed effective for various individuals and groups. Protestant theories of reform identified two types of poor: the worthy and the unworthy. The worthy were largely children, who could still be saved from inadequate mothering (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*) and who thus became the focus of Protestant reformers who “sought to manage New York’s poor” (McKeown and Brown 79). These worthy children were, if possible, removed from the homes of unworthy parents. During the 1850s, 60s, and 70s, Protestant reformers led by Charles Loring Brace and his Children’s Aid Society (Creagh “Orphan Trains”)—seen as child savers in middle-class communities and child snatchers in poor communities (Gordon 10-11)—“removed tens of thousands of poor immigrant children from New York City streets and homes and sent them to Protestant homes in the Midwest” (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion* 4), putting them in the care of worthy mothers who could provide

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27 Charles Loring Brace and his Children’s Aid Society were leaders of the Protestant reform movement and the masterminds of the Orphan Train movement, which relocated thousands of New York City orphans—children without parents, children whose parents were unable to care for them, and children whose parents were talked into surrendering custody by Aid Society agents—to homes in the Midwest and West (Gordon; Creagh “Orphan Trains”). The Foundling Asylum would later adopt and improve Loring’s system, adding an elaborate network of agents who vetted prospective foster parents and who checked on children after placement (Miller; Creagh “Orphan Trains”; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; Gordon).
“shelter, education, and Christian guidance” (Creagh “Orphan Trains” 202) and effectively converting Catholic children into Protestants.28

In addition to children, the worthy poor consisted of those who had fallen into poverty because of uncontrollable circumstances—such as illness or layoffs—or because of an isolated mistake from which they wanted to learn and for which they wanted to repent (Quiroga; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). Receiving help from Protestant institutions often meant proving such worthiness. For example, in the Infant Asylum, the Protestant foundling home that opened a few years after the Foundling Asylum, mothers had to provide proof that theirs was a first pregnancy in order to be admitted; making one mistake was human, but multiple out-of-wedlock pregnancies indicated a significant moral shortcoming (Quiroga; Miller 130). In order to illustrate the they wanted to learn from and repent for their mistake, mothers had to remain in the Protestant Infant Asylum with their infants receiving religious instruction, working, and often learning a trade for three to twelve months as determined by the Infant Asylum staff (Quiroga; Connelly; Miller 130). The hope was that, while mothers remained with their children, they could be taught to be pure, pious, and upstanding women (Connelly; Miller). While the Protestant Infant Asylum did work to save the lives of poor children and their mothers, that help was extended to only those who could illustrate their worth according to middle-class, Protestant values.

To the Catholic church, “Protestant charities and public welfare agencies were simply poorly disguised proselytizing forums” (Oates 225) that attempted to convert Catholic children without regard to their “religious heritage” or to what the Catholic church saw as the “jeopardy”

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28 Brace came under fire for his refusal to place Catholic children in Catholic homes. Further, Brace refused to place Mediterranean and Eastern-European children, “reflecting the anti-papist, anti-Italian, and anti-Slavic biases of his day” (Creagh “Orphan Trains” 202).
of their little souls (Creagh “Faith in Fostering” 2; Oates; McKeown and Brown). In response to Protestant reform efforts, the Catholic church began to create its own institutions and programs to help the poor and to ensure that poor Catholics, and particularly poor Catholic mothers and children, remained Catholic (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Miller; Gordon). Catholic reform efforts, like those of the Protestant church, were informed by the religion’s views toward poverty. The Catholic church viewed poverty as a systemic rather than moral problem (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion 5), configuring it as the result of oppressive social and economic systems rather than the moral failings of an individual or culture (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). The need to turn to the church or to church-run institutions for relief on a regular basis did not carry the same stigma as it did for Protestants (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion).

This view of poverty did not relieve good Catholics of their obligations to be hardworking, selfless, and above all chaste, but recognized that chronic poverty was not always or at least not entirely the result of moral shortcomings.

The obligation to be hardworking, selfless, and chaste was born more heavily by Catholic women than Catholic men. The good Catholic girl, central to Catholic and particularly Irish Catholic culture, was a figure of piety and poverty, selflessly giving all that she earned to family and church and subjugating her own needs and desires to theirs. She worked long, backbreaking days as a seamstress or maid, keeping just enough of her wages to feed and shelter herself and sending the majority home for the care of her immediate and extended family. If she had no family, she gave her wages to the church for the betterment of the community (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion). The good Catholic girl not only subjugated her material desires, but also, and most importantly, her sexual desires. In contrast to the image of the Protestant, Republic mother, the good Catholic girl remained single and virginal throughout her life. Historian Maureen
Fitzgerald posits that this focus on chastity was both spiritual and practical in nature. Without a family of her own to care for, the good Catholic girl was able to provide for her struggling extended family and community by contributing financially rather than creating more dependents.

While it cannot be assumed that all, or even many, Catholic women lived up to the figure of the good Catholic girl, she was nonetheless an important discursive figure of the time appearing frequently in popular literature, music, and religious tracts (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*). The good Catholic girl, illustrating clearly the connections between poverty, gender, and sexuality, is a figure that haunts many of the Foundling Letters. The mother of Julia R. Hudson writes “Please take care of this baby as I can not do it myself. I trust God will reward you. I do not know if I live or die. I give it up in charge of you and the almighty. I have sinned and can not expect good luck.” The specter of the good Catholic girl can also be seen in the letter written by C.T., who left her grandson John Darien at the Foundling Asylum on December 18, 1872: “The mother is young and poor, was always good before this, was taken in and knows little of the world…I, her mother will do the best I can for her; will not cast her off.” The mother of Julia Hudson and Grandmother of John Darden clearly recognized that the mothers had not lived up to a standard.

In both the Protestant and Irish Catholic conceptions, despite their differences, poverty is irrevocably tied to gender, motherhood, and sexuality. Nowhere is this connection clearer than in their shared construction of the figure of the fallen or ruined woman. The ruined or fallen woman is a complex figure of both scorn and pity popularized by popular novels, newspaper and magazine articles, and religious and reform tracts that sought to scare young women into closely guarding their virtue or to engender in the middle and upper classes sympathy and charity for the
Although a discursive construction, the fallen or ruined woman represented and shaped attitudes toward and treatment of real single mothers. Although the details of the fallen woman’s story may vary, the basic narrative remains the same: a young woman, though she desired to be chaste and good, was seduced by a libertine who deserted her when she became pregnant. Both the shame of her illicit sexual activity and the economic burden of an unwanted child were too much to bear, and she began an irrevocable downward spiral into poverty, prostitution, and eventually infanticide and suicide (Sisters of Charity; Miller; Brumberg; “City Crime Again”). This downward spiral was inevitable given that the fallen woman violated the sexual norms of Victorian society and selfishly placed her own base sexual desires before her feminine duty as a wife, mother, and community member (Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*). The figure of the fallen or ruined woman was noted even in secular publications such as The *New York Times*, which, in an article dated October 2, 1855, describes the nature of her downward spiral:

> She knows that, once discovered, she can see the face of innocent or undiscovered woman no more, that she must go forth with the father of her child until her tires of her, must be passed off then to another, must result in the brothel, and so sink lower and lower, day by day, until the curtains of the hospital bed shall be drawn, and her tainted, unloved body be carried to its nameless grave in Potter’s Field. She knows, too, that while she is on this fast descent, he is waltzing with the pure, pressing the hands of the respectable; taking wine with her former equal…And so she flies, sometimes to suicide, sometimes to this monstrous infanticide. (4)

The ruined or fallen woman was thus scorned, ostracized, and devalued because she had lost her virtue, as a woman’s worth and her future were tied to her virginity. To be ruined or fallen meant more than just a simple loss of virginity; to be ruined also meant a loss of a future as a wife and mother, of the potential for economic security, and of a place within the community (Brumberg; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*).
Although the ruined or fallen woman was a figure of shame ostracized from the community, she was also pitied as her fall was not entirely of her own doing; she fell prey to a libertine, to one of the many young male “sexual adventurers” that stalked the city, robbing vulnerable young women of their virtue (Ireland 95). The fallen or ruined woman was thus a woman both with and without agency; both her fall and its inevitable consequences were framed in such a way that illustrated her helplessness against men, but she also bore the entirety of the moral and economic responsibility.

Even though the figure of the fallen woman was very much a social, discursive construction, her story both reflected and shaped attitudes toward real single mothers. The fallen woman’s narrative dovetailed with the Protestant and Catholic attitudes toward poverty that informed their respective reform movements and with the material, economic realities faced by working women to form a vision of a poor, single mother that the Foundling Mothers both defer to and assert against in their letters. In other words, the Foundling mothers both take on and distance themselves from the figure of the fallen woman as they secure care for their children and argue for their worth as mothers and as women. The story of the single, working mother is the first of three stories that inform the Foundling Mothers shared rhetorical situation; the second is that of the Foundling Asylum as an institution.

2.2.2 The Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity of New York

In the mid-19th century, at the same time that the population of New York was skyrocketing and Protestants and Catholics alike were working to reform the city’s poor, New York experienced a significant increase of abandoned and murdered infants (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Sisters of Charity; Connelly; Campbell). In the 1860s, each month
between 100 and 150 infants were found abandoned or dead on the streets of New York City (Fitzgerald “Perils” 52). This increase in abandonment and infanticide is attributable to a constellation of factors, many of which are associated, either through cause or consequence, with poverty (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Gordon; Gilje). As explained earlier, lack of work caused by immigration and changes in the labor market, low wages, long hours, and poor living conditions made it difficult for mothers to work while caring for an infant. The stigma associated with illicit sexual activity and illegitimate births further isolated women who needed a community to survive (Miller; Gordon; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Gilje). As historian Paul A. Gilje notes “an impoverished woman's position worsened with a pregnancy that placed new constraints and restrictions upon her. In such circumstances the middle-class ideals of motherhood were impossible to maintain” (585). And so, increasing numbers of infants were left in churches, at the doors of wealthy homes, or taken to police stations while still others were drowned, smothered, or simply left to the elements.

As the numbers of abandoned infants increased, newspapers filled with stories of infants found dead “in a wooden box in an old unoccupied building” (New York Daily Times “Supposed Infanticide”), placed “in front of the basement of a house” belonging to a wealthy family (New York Daily Times “Foundling”), or drowned in a sink (New York Daily Times “Alleged Attempted Infanticide”). These press accounts, some sensational and others resigned and matter-of-fact, made present for middle- and upper-class reformers the vulnerable foundling child. These reformers began to question how the city was handling its foundlings.

Unfortunately, New York City handled its foundling children by spiriting them away, out of sight and of mind. Prior to the opening of the foundling homes in the late 1860s and early
1870s, abandoned infants were taken to the almshouse on Randall’s island, where they were given to female inmates to raise (Miller; Campbell; “Catholic Charities of New York”).

Randall’s Island, by the 1850s, had “degenerated into a custodial institution which separated from society a motley group of the poor, feeble-minded, petty-criminal, idiotic and crippled” (English 701). The overcrowded, filthy conditions worked to quickly spread disease, particularly to vulnerable infants. Further, the almshouse struggled to both find and pay for wet nurses, which made feeding motherless infants difficult. Because there was no viable alternative to breastmilk, feeling a motherless infant meant hiring a wet nurse or risking disease and infection through dry feeding. Between malnutrition, disease, and simple failure to thrive, between 85 and 95 percent of all infants placed in the Randall’s Island almshouse died within their first year (Miller 7; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage” 35). These foundling were ‘discovered’ in the almshouses by public health reformer Dorothea Dix during her 1844 inspection of New York’s almshouses and, following the public outcry generated by Dix’s report, the New York State Select Committee was created in 1858 to investigate “the care of people housed in charitable institutions” (English 700-701; Creagh “Benevolent Leverage” 35); the Committee

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29 By the mid-1870s, there were four foundling homes in New York City: the almshouse on Randall’s Island, which by that time had added a facility specifically for children; the Foundling Asylum; and the New York Infants Asylum and the Nursery and Children’s Hospital, both small Protestant institutions (Miller).

30 Almshouses were institutions designed to house and feed the destitute and those who, due to mental or physical illness, were unable to provide for themselves; unfortunately, by the mid-19th century, New York City’s almshouses had developed severe problems with overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and easy spread of disease. Poor elderly widows, injured single working men, prostitutes dying of venereal diseases, young children abandoned by their parents, and motherless infants shared the same space, in rooms so crowded that beds were pushed up against each other (Miller 62-63).

31 Although there were other almshouses in New York City, the majority of New York City’s motherless infants were taken to Randall’s Island.

32 Dry feeding was a perilous enterprise in the second half of the 19th century. Children were fed condensed milk or cow’s milk mixed with sugar and crackers, neither of which could match the nutritional qualities of breastmilk. Further, the milk itself and the water used to clean bottles, spoons, rags, and other dry feeding implements was often contaminated, which meant that bacteria spread easily. As a result, dry nursed children tended to be sickly, making them even more vulnerable to disease, and many died of malnutrition (Miller 65-66; Creagh "Benevolent Leverage" 53).
recommended that children be removed from the almshouse and placed in special institutions (English 699-701), but because resources had to be redirected to the war effort (Miller), it would be a decade before any such institutions were opened.

Abandoned infants were taken to Randall’s Island because they could not be taken to orphanages; while there were many orphanages in New York City, they were designed for older children. Feeding and caring for motherless infants was difficult and expensive; wet nurses had to be hired to feed them, and infants generally required more time and care from staff. Infants were also vulnerable to illness and disease, bringing with them to the potential to increase the orphanages’ rates of illness and mortality. High rates of mortality and illness could make orphanages appear ineffective, which put their funding in danger. Because most orphanages were private rather than state-run, they were funded primarily through private donations; people were less likely to donate to homes in which significant percentages of children fell ill and died. In addition to the practical concerns associated with caring for motherless newborns, there was also a social motive for refusing foundlings: some orphanages, and perhaps some donors, objected to illegitimate children intermingling with legitimate ones (Miller).

Thus, with increasing numbers of children being abandoned or killed and with no suitable place for them to be taken, the Catholic and Protestant churches began creating homes specifically designed to care for motherless infants. Public reaction to such institutions, though, was mixed. Many argued that providing social and economic relief to single mothers, as well as opportunities to repent and religious education about the importance of their virtue, would save the lives of children and keep their mothers from the fallen woman’s inevitable downward spiral (Connelly; Campbell; Sisters of Charity). Others felt that the opportunity to dispose of the social and economic burden of an unwanted child was an invitation, and even an encouragement, to
vice (Campbell; Connelly); women who made the decision to engage in illicit sex should be obligated to shoulder the consequences. In the end, the need to save the lives of innocent children prevailed, and both the Protestant and Catholic churches began plans to establish homes for motherless infants. The Protestant Infants Asylum was the first to open its doors in 1865, but failed and was shortly closed (Miller 4).\(^{33}\) Four years later in 1869, the Foundling Asylum opened at the behest of Archbishop John McClosky—who wanted to help the city’s poor and to save the lives of innocent children but who also feared the proselytizing of Protestant charities (Miller 135)—and was directed by Sister Mary Irene (Miller; Walsh; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*). In late 1869, Sister Irene was given five dollars cash (the equivalent of approximately $90 modern dollars) and the help of three other Sisters\(^ {34}\) and was charged with opening the Foundling Asylum. After touring orphanages and foundling homes in other states that were run by the Sisters of Charity and after studying the Sisters’ founding home in France, Sister Mary Irene rented a small house on 12\(^{th}\) street, taking residence on October 11, 1869 (Miller 137; Walsh; Campbell). Although the formal opening was planned for the 1\(^{st}\) of the year, the first foundling, a little girl named Sarah, was left on their stoop the day after the Sisters took residence (Miller; Walsh; Sisters of Charity). During their first month, the Foundling Asylum took in 11 infants; by the end of their first year, they had taken in 1,183 (Miller 137).

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\(^{33}\) The Infants Asylum would reopen in 1871 (Miller 4).

\(^{34}\) Within six years, Sister Irene had developed the Foundling Asylum into the largest home for infants in the state, caring for thousands of children each year on a budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars and employing hundreds. In 1875, the institution moved to a specifically constructed building—Sister Irene had raised $100,000 dollars for the construction—that took up an entire city block, and by the time of Sister Irene’s death in 1896, the Foundling Asylum included a lying-in hospital for expectant mothers, an internationally known children’s research hospital, a nursing school, and the state’s first daycare facility for working mothers (Miller; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; Campbell; “Sister Mary Irene Dead”; Walsh; “History”).
The Foundling Asylum took in any infant born in the city of New York regardless of the circumstances of its birth, its health, or its race\(^{35}\) (Connolly 184; “In the Foundling Asylum” 2; Sisters of Charity Third Annual Report 8), and, most importantly, the Foundling Asylum accepted infants without their mothers. These policies stood in contrast to the Protestant Infants Asylum, which would not accept infants who were deemed in poor health or who carried hereditary disease and required that mothers enter the institution with their infants (Quiroga). Given these policies, it is not a surprise that the Foundling Asylum quickly became the largest foundling home in the city and later in the country (Walsh; McKeown and Brown). In the first months of the Foundling Asylum’s operations—late 1869 to sometime in mid-1870—a white wicker cradle was placed in the foyer of the house on 12\(^{th}\) street so that infants could be left there anonymously. After leaving her infant in the cradle, the mother would ring the bell to alert an attendant and then could simply walk away (Walsh; Campbell). However, as the year wore on, more infants were left than the Foundling Asylum had resources to care for. So, the Foundling Asylum moved to a larger building on Washington Square, and the cradle was removed. If mothers wanted to secure a place for their infants in the institution, they would be

\[^{35}\text{Although the Foundling Asylum was the only foundling institution to accept children of color, this does not mean that they did not also subscribe to many of the racial prejudices of the period. For example, when African American twins were admitted to the Foundling Asylum in January of 1871, they were renamed Sambo and Susannah Daniels by the Asylum staff, despite their mother indicating in the note she left that their names were Daniel and Mary Catherine Griffin.}\]
asked to speak directly with members of staff, often Sister Irene or her second in command Sister Theresa Vincent (Walsh).

After the removal of the white cradle and the move to Washington square, the admittance of infants into the Foundling Asylum became more regulated. Not all infants brought to the Foundling Asylum were admitted; however, it is not entirely clear how staff decided who to admit and who to turn away; nor it is clear how many infants were denied admission. Both secondary and primary sources (Walsh; Quiroga; Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Campbell) suggest vaguely that the Foundling Asylum was forced to turn away many deserving infants but the Foundling Asylum itself cites only two criteria for refusal to admit children: 1) the child was born outside New York City and 2) the child belonged to a mother “known to [the Foundling Asylum] to be employed and amply compensated as wet-nurses elsewhere” who planned to surrender her own infant in order to be able to nurse another (Sisters of Charity Third Annual Report 6-7; Quiroga). The Foundling Asylum’s literature condemns such mercenary mothering: “the mother, whether married or unfortunate, who decides to act as a wet-nurse for pay, and in order to do so rids herself of the burden of her child by abandoning it to us, exhibits a heartlessness and an absence of maternal duty which we feel ourselves obliged to oppose, and against which our moral sense revolts” (Sisters of Charity Third Annual Report 7). Thus, while the Foundling Asylum may have had other criteria for accepting or turning away infants, as they do not appear to have accepted all children brought to their doors, they did not publish those criteria.

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36 Because the institution was partially funded by the city and the state of New York, the Sisters were only able to accept infants born in New York City (Sisters of Charity; Walsh).
Infants were brought to the Foundling Asylum, whether admitted or turned away, through a number of different avenues. The majority of infants who were surrendered to the Foundling Asylum where brought to the institution by their mothers, but the Foundling Letters indicate some infants were surrendered through other means. Some were brought by grandmothers or close family friends. A few infants were surrendered by their fathers. Others were sent to the Foundling Asylum from other charities—orphanages, hospitals, almshouses, immigrant organizations—when their mothers passed away or proved otherwise unable to care for them.

Infants who were admitted into the Foundling Asylum were examined by a doctor, bathed, given a name and case number, and baptized as Catholics (Sisters of Charity; Walsh; Connelly). Although the Sisters of Charity understood that not all of mothers who surrendered children were Catholic, they operated on the assumption that the mothers were, and all children were baptized Catholic (Connelly). After all, should a Protestant or Jewish mother return to claim her infant, he or she could always be baptized into the mother’s faith later (Connelly). Children who were ill were retained in the institution so that they could be cared for by the Foundling Asylum’s nurses and doctors; infants who were in at least decent health were sent out to wet nurses who lived in tenements across the city. These outdoor nurses—who were required to undergo health screenings and submit letters of recommendation—received $10 a month to
care for the infants and brought them to the Foundling Asylum once a month for required health checks (Sisters of Charity; Walsh; Campbell). By the 1875, the Foundling Asylum employed hundreds of outside nurses, providing the community with an important source of jobs (Miller; Sisters of Charity; Campbell). Taking in a foundling infant meant that mothers could earn a wage while still remaining in the home to care for their own children. Foundlings remained with the outdoor nurses’ families until they were old enough to be weaned at approximately two-years-old, at which point the ‘walkabouts’ were returned to the Foundling Asylum (Campbell; Miller; Walsh). Often outdoor nurses would then take another foundling infant, beginning the cycle again. The toddlers, upon being returned to the Foundling Asylum, lived in the institution for several years until they were old enough to be adopted. The Foundling Asylum kept the children for at least the first three years of their lives in order to allow their birth parents plenty of time to reclaim them (Gordon). If they were not reclaimed by their third birthdays, the children were put up for adoption\(^{37}\). Most were sent by train to Catholic homes—Foundling Asylum children were never placed in homes of other faiths—in the Midwest and New England. The children were never told of their parentage by Foundling staff, as was common for the period (McKeown and Brown; Gordon); those adopted by amenable families at a young enough age were often told that they were finally rejoining their biological families\(^{38}\) (Gordon). Thus, by the mid-1870s the Foundling Asylum was caring for 1500-2000 infants annually and had expanded from a foundling home into a large-scale institution that acted as an orphanage,

\(^{37}\) Adoption for the Foundling Asylum worked more like our current system of foster care than of adoption. Children were placed with families who had been vetted by local priests, but the Foundling Asylum retained legal custody. A network of agents was employed to visit the adoptive homes and check on the children. If a family’s care was found to be inadequate, the child would either be rehomed with another family in the area or sent back to New York (Walsh; McKeown and Brown; Gordon; Creagh “Orphan Trains”).

\(^{38}\) Interestingly, the Foundling Asylum went out of its way to match children with adoptive parents who looked like them (Gordon).
supervised foster placements, and brokered adoptions (“Sister Mary Irene Dead”; Miller; Gordon; Walsh).

The Foundling Asylum, while it worked to save the lives of abandoned and unwanted infants, also worked to save the lives of their mothers. This work was based on two primary strategies. First, the Sisters of Charity hoped that by providing mothers with a way to relieve themselves of the economic and social burden of an unwanted child, the mothers might avoid the fate of the fallen woman. Second, the Sisters of Charity encouraged women to remain at the Foundling Asylum with their infants for as long possible. The Sisters hoped that by bonding with their infants and removing themselves from the physically and spiritually toxic environment of the tenements, the mothers’ souls might be saved as they learned to be virtuous, maternal women: “the poor girl led away by intrigue, or even willfully straying from virtue, can retrace her steps, by entering the Asylum…learning perhaps to walk in the way of virtue” (Sisters of Charity Report (1871) 4).

Encouraging mothers to remain in the Foundling Asylum with their children also helped solve a significant problem: how to feed motherless infants. When mothers remained with their children they acted as wet nurses, nursing at least one other infant alongside their own and helping care for the other children (Sisters of Charity; Walsh). The Foundling Asylum took care to ensure that women were not identified as the infants’ mothers; in order to protect the mothers’ reputations, no distinctions were made between mothers and hired nurses who worked in the Asylum (Sisters of Charity; Walsh). After a few months, the mothers were able to leave the Foundling—and their children—to rejoin their communities without the shame or economic burden of an infant (Sisters of Charity; Walsh).
The Foundling Asylum worked, in other words, to help mothers avoid the inevitable downward spiral of the fallen woman; however, the institution’s endorsement of that narrative is somewhat equivocal. The Foundling Asylum’s literature echoes the shame that single, sexually active women should feel as a result of their fall; however, the Sisters did not, as did many newspaper articles, novels, and religious tracts of the period, cast such women as permanently ruined or as without some agency. In the Sisters’ estimation, after all, it is the mothers who are retracing their steps toward the path of virtue. In describing their success rate with fallen women, the Sisters write they have “scarcely ever found it difficult to turn the hearts and souls of these poor fallen ones back to good. Hundreds of these seemingly outcasts are now filling respectable, though often humble, positions in estimable families” (Sisters of Charity Report (1876) 9). These fallen women, with the help of the Foundling Asylum, could regain their respectability and their economic futures if not their virtue.

2.2.3 The Foundling Mothers

While the history and policies of the Foundling Asylum as an institution and the social and economic circumstances faced by single, working mothers in Victorian New York provide context for the Foundling Letters, that context is somewhat complicated by the Letters’ nature. The Foundling Asylum, as previously discussed, did not keep records of mothers. While the mothers, in the service of securing care for their children at the Asylum, may have told Sisters Irene and Theresa Vincent the stories of their lives and of the circumstances of their children’s births, these stories were never written down (Walsh). Recording the details of the mothers’ falls worked against the Founding Asylum’s mission to protect the lives and futures of foundling children and their mothers. Sisters Irene and Theresa Vincent fought against the city of New
York for decades over whether their records of children would become public records (McKeown and Brown 94) as the Foundling Asylum began to receive public funds. Many times the Foundling Asylum was petitioned to allow their records to become evidence in divorce and paternity cases (“Wants to Know His Parents”; “Finds Missing Son”; “Bars Foundling’s Mother”; “Court At Last”) or be sent to social workers at other charitable organizations, but each time they fought against the release of those records (McKeown and Brown 94). Thus, all that remains of the Foundling mothers’ stories is their letters.

The contents of those letters, though, can be used to piece together a picture of who the Foundling mothers might have been. Although each woman is an individual, the Foundling mothers share several characteristics. They were almost universally poor, as almost all of the letters in the full collection housed at the New York Historical Society mention poverty as the reason for surrendering their children; thus, considering the economic situation of single, working mothers is important in understanding the Foundling mothers’ larger rhetorical situation. That economic situation was dire, as my previous discussion has illustrated; work, when available, required long hours of backbreaking labor for very little pay, a situation incompatible with the needs of an infant. The Foundling Letters indicate that the Foundling mothers were primarily single; many Foundling mothers discuss being ‘deceived under the promise of marriage’ or deserted by a spouse or lover. While a few Foundling Letters indicate that both parents decided, together, to surrender the child, these letters are the exception. The Foundling Letters also illustrate that the Foundling mothers were keenly aware of the shame and social ostracization they faced for having given birth to and surrendered foundlings. A mother who signed her letter with the name Charity, for example, writes, “Take this precious child under your protection & care. She was born Sept. 22nd 1874. The mother is a resident of this city, only
16 years old. To hide her shame she takes this method of disposing of her offspring, for she is unmarried.” The underlining is original to the letter, putting further emphasis on the need to hide the shame of an illegitimate child.

Thus, the Foundling Letters must be read against the social and religious stigma surrounding illicit sex and illegitimate births. The majority of the Foundling Letters are addressed to the Sisters of Charity, often to Sister Irene specifically, indicating that the mothers knew something of the institution and its policies. My approach to the Foundling mothers’ larger rhetorical situation, or the Foundling Letter’s contexts, is thus informed by the story of single, working mothers, of the Foundling Asylum, and of the Foundling mothers as individuals, or at least what they have chosen to reveal in their letters.

2.3 The Foundling Letters as Historical and Material Artifacts

The three stories inform the larger rhetorical situation in which the Foundling Letters were composed. In other words, these stories represent those of the Foundling mothers and constitute the first way in which this chapter approaches the Foundling Letters as artifacts. In this section, I explore the stories of the Foundling Letters as historical and material artifacts—the second way this chapter approaches the Letters as artifacts—specifically how they came to be archived by the New York Historical Society (NYHS) and selected for inclusion in this dissertation. Thus, this section has two aims: 1) explain how the Foundling Letters are archived and how this method of archiving influences this dissertation and 2) elucidate this dissertation’s sample selection process.
2.3.1 The New York Historical Society Archives

The Foundling Letters are archived in five large scrapbooks as part of the Foundling Hospital collection\(^\text{39}\) at the New York Historical Society (NYHS). Together, the scrapbooks contain approximately 1000 letters and notes written between 1869 and 1884. The letters have not been archived individually; instead, the scrapbooks are archived as units. As a result, there is neither an exact count of nor individual metadata for the letters. The scrapbooks were composed by the Foundling Asylum staff prior to becoming part of the collection at the NYHS in 2009. Moreover, since becoming part of the Foundling Hospital collection at the NYHS, the scrapbook pages have been removed from the original scrapbooks and placed in large three-ring binders under protective plastic.

There are three essential conditions of the scrapbooks’ construction that influence how the letters can be read. First, each scrapbook page contains multiple letters that have been pasted next to an accompanying typed transcript that was prepared by Foundling Asylum staff; unfortunately, the transcripts are not entirely faithful, as punctuation and spelling have been corrected, style and syntax have been modernized, and in some cases information has been added or eliminated. For example, the transcript of the letter left with one-day-old John

\(^{39}\) The Foundling Asylum changed its name to the Foundling Hospital in 1881. I use the name Foundling Asylum in this dissertation because the name change took place at the end of the period during which the Foundling Letters were written (1869–1884). The NYHS, however, uses the name Foundling Hospital in all of their materials.
Larkin on October 2, 1870 reads as follows: “John Larkin, born Oct. 2nd, 1870, christened by Father Everet. I will do all I can toward his support. I am his heart-broken mother; but I hope I can have at sometime, if not here in Heaven, I hope.” The actual letter, however, reads differently: “Born the 2nd of Oct. christened By father everet the babys name is John Larkin I will do all I can towards the support I am his hart broken mother but I hope I can have him sometime if not hear in heavin I hope.” The transcriptionist revised the syntax of the first and second sentences, corrected the spelling and punctuation throughout, and included a typo in the final sentence that creates an error where there is none in the original. Second, because the letters are pasted onto scrapbook pages, only the first page of some multipage letters is visible; if both sides of the paper are written on, the back side of the letter is unfortunately no longer viewable. Finally, the margins of many of the letters were trimmed, cutting off administrative markings made by the Foundling Asylum staff. While many of these markings serve only to indicate the child’s file number, others provide valuable information about the child’s circumstances, such as the names of mothers or parties who brought the child to the Foundling Asylum or the fate of the child after he or she entered the institution. For example, the note left with 3-month-old Bridget Downs on November 10, 1870 has her mother Lucy’s name recorded at the bottom. The administrative markings on the note left with Ella Dunn on August 9, 1871 provide important details about her birth and the Foundling Asylum’s policies: “admitted as Ella Farley / Left by mother / Father promised marriage / Seen by Sister Irene.” For some letters, these administrative markings have been cut off with the margins. The unfaithful transcripts, the

40 These markings are identifiable as such because they are written in a different hand and with a different writing instrument than the prose of the letter.

41 Unfortunately, because the scrapbooks were compiled after the children were admitted, it is unclear whether the administrative markings were made by Foundling Asylum staff when the children were admitted or by later staff members who compiled the scrapbooks.
pasting of the letters onto the page, and the trimming of the margins, while they may seem relatively minor, create challenges in analyzing some letters.

While much can be determined about how the scrapbooks were structured, little is known about when or why. The NYHS does not know exactly when or for what purpose the scrapbooks were created (O’Reilly), but it seems possible that they were created in 1959 for the Foundling Asylum’s 90th anniversary exhibition (Walsh 106). The exhibition, as described by Sister of Charity Marie De Lourdes Walsh, celebrated the Foundling Asylum’s move to new buildings from the old facility they had occupied since 1873 and included “displays of old photographs of the institution, pen and ink sketches from illustrated magazines of the 1870s, and original manuscripts and letters dating from the same period” (Walsh 106-107).

While they may have been compiled by the Foundling Asylum in 1959, the scrapbooks were acquired by the NYHS in 2009 as part of a larger Foundling Hospital collection that includes administrative records, promotional materials, and photos dating from 1869 to 2009. To publicize the collection, 31 Foundling Letters were digitized and uploaded to the NYHS Flickr feed42. The feed includes photos of individual letters alongside their transcripts, as well as photos of full scrapbook pages. The 31 digitized letters are a sample of convenience, as the NYHS indicated that their archivist did not use a “formal selection process” in determining which letters to digitize: “And as far as what was chosen to digitize, I am pretty sure that Cherie [the NYHS project archivist] just chose some letters to digitize. I doubt that there was any real formula as I recall that the project [of archiving the entire Foundling Hospital collection] was ending and Cherie had some time left over and filled the extra time with the digitization of them” (O’Reilly). The 31 digitized letters have circulated widely, as they were used to promote the

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42 The Flickr feed can be accessed here: https://www.flickr.com/photos/n-yhs/collections.
collection in a number of newspaper articles, can be found on Pinterest and other social media sites, and have been featured in many personal blogs and websites. In conclusion, the Foundling Letters are archived in two primary ways. The physical archive, accessible only in person at the NYHS, holds five scrapbooks that contain the full 1000-letter corpus, while the Flickr feed houses the 31 digitized letters that have circulated widely. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I use *corpus* to refer to the 1000-letter corpus, *digitized sample* to refer to the 31 digitized letters, and *sample* to refer to the 17 letters analyzed in this dissertation.

Although the corpus and the digitized sample can be seen as two different groups of letters, the digitized sample is a sample of convenience drawn from the corpus. Thus, the corpus and digitized sample share similar characteristics in terms of content, as I will detail later in this section. During my visit to the NYHS archive, I did not have time to catalogue and record metadata for each individual letter; instead, I used my time to look across the entire corpus, examining and recording who was authoring the letters, their rhetorical purposes, and the rhetorical moves they made. Based on patterns of gender, authorship, purpose, length and content, I composed a taxonomy consisting of six types of letters. Each letter type is included in both the 1000-letter corpus and the 31-letter digitized sample. In my review of the corpus at the NYHS archive, I identified six types of letters: 1) short notes, 2) mothers’ letters, 3) mothers’ notes, 4) letters of recommendation and introduction, 5) fathers’ letters, and 6) custody letters. I created this taxonomy based on patterns of gender, authorship, purpose, content, and length that I saw recurring across the corpus of letters.

The first and most prevalent type of letter in the corpus is the short note, which comprises approximately 54 percent of the corpus. Short notes are fewer than 20 words in length and are used to convey the infant’s name, date of birth, and/or baptism information. Because the notes
are so brief and contain no information about the author, there is nothing in the notes to indicate authorship.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.9\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{Short note left with Bridget Downs, New York Historical Society.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.9\textwidth]{image2.png}
\caption{Short note left with Andrew Warren, New York Historical Society.}
\end{figure}

The second type of letter included in the corpus is the mother’s letter, or those that were written by the child’s mother. These letters, which range from 25 to 200 words, contain formal features associated with a letter—greetings, signatures, clearly demarcated paragraphs, an introduction, body, and conclusion structure—and share a common set of rhetorical purposes in which the mothers petition for their children’s care and argue for their own worth as mothers and women. The emphasis put on these purposes vary—some letters focus more on the child’s care or on arguing for respectability—as does the adherence to formal letter structure.

\textsuperscript{43} I will review the ways in which I ascertain the authorship of unsigned letters in section 2.3.3 when I discuss the criteria used to select this dissertation’s sample.

\textsuperscript{44} Throughout this dissertation, I use brackets to differentiate between the text written by the letter’s author and the administrative markings made by the Foundling Asylum staff.
Mothers’ notes, the third type of letter included in the corpus, combine the brevity and basic information of the short note with the rhetorical goals of the mothers’ letter. In addition to the infants’ name, date of birth, and baptism information, mothers’ notes typically contain a line about the child’s care or the mother’s situation; however, they are not as long as mothers’ letters—averaging between 15 and 30 words—or as argument focused.

Sister Superioress

I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am at present with no means and with out any relatives to nurse my baby. Therefore I beg you for god sake to take my child; until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray god for you

I remain humble servant

Theresa Perazzo
New York Dec 3rd 1874

Figure 2.7 Mother’s letter written by Theresa Perazzo, New York Historical Society.
The fourth type of letter included in the corpus is the letter of recommendation or introduction (or LoRIs). These letters are written by priests, doctors, and other authority figures within the community, usually men\(^{45}\), and petition Sister Irene to accept a child and/or mother into the Foundling Asylum. These letters typically follow a similar pattern in which the author speaks to the mother’s good character before her pregnancy and her contrition over her fall, describes the mother’s circumstances, and then asks that she and/or her child be admitted to the Foundling Asylum. Sometimes, these letters were sent directly to Sister Irene; other times, the letters were carried to the Foundling Asylum by the mothers themselves, as indicated by the letters’ text: “the bearer of this note, Rose Smith, contracted an invalid marriage with a Protestant a couple of years ago.”

\(^{45}\) There are a few letters of recommendation and introduction that were written by women, typically the directors of other charitable organizations; however, these letters amount to 12 of approximately 133 total letters.
Fathers’ letters, the fifth type of letter present in the corpus, are the least represented type of letter, as the corpus contains a dozen. Because there are so few, I grouped together the fathers’ letters based on gender and authorship rather than on a shared purpose or length. The letters typically describe the fathers’ situations and ask that the infant be cared for. Of the types of letters included in the corpus, the fathers’ letters have the most variation between them. Fathers’ letters do not, for example, include similar content like short notes. Nor do they follow a predictable organization like letters of recommendation and introduction.

[1182 ok]
New York, Sept. 30th
1870
Sister
This child’s name is Daniel Hanley he has a good father and mother but his mother has lost her health and has gone to Ireland to try and regain it The woman I gave my child to returned it and would not care it. I shall reward you as far as my means will allow me in every way. He is not much trouble he will go to sleep with a little rocking. He is 13 months old and is weaned 7 months.

Figure 2.10 Father’s letter left with Daniel Hanley

The final type of letter is the letter of custody, or form letters in which mothers signed over legal custody of their infants to the Foundling Asylum. Some custody letters are forms in which the mother filled in her personal information and signed the bottom. Others are the same
form handwritten in the format of a letter by the Foundling Asylum staff and signed by the mother.

I Annie Ress Mother of a female infant child, aged 1 mo 9 days named Annie born at 876 Park av Brooklyn do hereby surrender and intrust to the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity in the City of New York, for the period of minority years, the entire management and control of such child, and do hereby assign to and invest said corporation with the same powers and control over said child as those of which I am possessed.

Annie Ress
Witness Hugh Hughes

Figure 2.11 Custody letter signed by Annie Ress.

With the exception of fathers’ letters and letters of custody, which represent the smallest portion of the corpus, each type of letter present in the corpus is also present in the 31-letter digitized sample. The digitized sample includes four short notes, 18 mothers’ letters, five mothers’ notes, and three letters of recommendation and introduction. Mothers’ letters, the type of letter analyzed in this dissertation, are in fact overrepresented in the digitized sample, as the corpus contains proportionally many more short notes and letters of recommendation and introduction than does the digitized sample; within the 1000-letter corpus, approximately 54

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46 Several of these letters are incomplete, meaning that the entire letter is no longer visible because it was pasted into a scrapbook page. These letters do not do not meet this study’s selection criteria because they cannot be fully transcribed.
percent of the letters are short notes, 14 percent are LoRIs, and 25 percent are mothers’ letters and notes, but in the digitized sample 16 percent of the letters are short notes, 13 percent are LoRIs, and 74 percent are mothers’ letters and notes.

While the digitized sample resembles the approximately 1000-letter corpus in that both contain similar types of letters, it is also similar in that the same patterns of vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical moves are visible in both. In a broad sense, the types of letters share similar characteristics. So, for example, the short notes in both the corpus and the digitized sample are of a similar length and relay similar information. The mothers’ letters in both the corpus and the digitized sample also contain the same patterns in their use of language. One such pattern, which will be discussed extensively in chapters three, four, and five, is the Foundling mothers’ tendency to vacillate between referring to themselves with first- and third-person nouns and pronouns. When making an argument for their respectability or discussing their situations, the Foundling mothers tend to refer to themselves in first person, but when talking about themselves as mothers or about surrendering their children, they tend to use third-person pronouns, frequently referring to themselves as “its mother” or “the mother.” Although the use of this linguistic move varies in that some mothers use it more frequently or put it to slightly different rhetorical purposes, the vacillation between pronouns is consistently present in mothers’ letters in both the 1000-letter corpus and the digitized sample. Another similar pattern can be seen in the mothers’ enclosing of tokens, for example a ribbon or locket, in their letters. The tokens were designed to stay with the child so that he or she could be identified when the mother returned for him or her, but the tokens also serve to create a material tie between mother and child. The use of such tokens can be seen in mothers’ letters in both the corpus and the digitized sample. For example, Willie’s mother, who did not date her letter, included a ‘General Grant for
our next President’ badge along with her letter so that Willie could readily be identified should she return for him. Willie C’s mother likewise left a locket with her son, asking that “the child have it all the time. So as to be identified; as no mistake must be made as to which child is the one wanted.” In other words, the letters included in the digitized sample follow similar patterns as those in the full corpus.

2.3.2 Selecting the 17-Letter Sample

The full Foundling Letter corpus consists of approximately 1000 letters compiled into scrapbooks that are part of a larger Foundling Hospital collection housed at the New York Historical Society. To publicize the acquisition of the collection, the NYHS digitized and circulated 31 letters. The 17-letter sample analyzed in this dissertation is selected from the digitized sample. In this section, I first discuss the limitations and advantages of selecting from the digitized sample and, second, elucidate the selection process used to identify the 17 letters that make up this dissertation’s sample. I recognize that, although the 31 digitized letters are part of the 1000-letter corpus and thus share with it similar characteristics of authorship, content, and length, selecting from the digitized sample is a limitation of this study, as doing so means that I have fewer letters with which to work. Although I have read every letter in the 1000-letter corpus and, as described in the previous section, have verified that the organization, content, and linguistic and rhetorical moves of the 17 mothers’ letters and mothers’ notes analyzed in this
dissertation are indicative of those in the full corpus, I am working with approximately 7 percent of the mothers’ letters and notes in the entire corpus. Working from the entire corpus, though, is not possible given that I have neither the time necessary in the NYHS archive to analyze and transcribe all 239 mothers and letters and notes nor the ability to photograph or otherwise digitally reproduce them. While I was allowed to take photos of the letters during my trip to the NYHS archive, those photos are not usable for analysis. The NYHS reading room is lit by beautiful chandeliers that unfortunately cast a considerable glare on the protective plastic in which the scrapbook pages are encased. As can be seen in the photo at below, the glare obscures parts of the letter and makes transcription impossible in some cases. The NYHS has specific guidelines for how the scrapbooks must be viewed: the binders in which the scrapbooks are stored must be viewed in cradles from which they cannot be removed, the cradles cannot be removed from the table and must stay in a specific position on the table, and flash cannot be used to photograph the pages. I tried several times to lift or adjust the page a bit to reduce the glare (and was repeatedly scolded for doing so), but I was not always able to take a useable photo. While I could ask NYHS staff to perhaps photograph or scan a few of the letters for me, I cannot ask them to digitally reproduce 239 letters.

The 31 digitized letters from which this dissertation’s 17-letter sample is selected are also a sample of convenience and were not chosen with any “formal selection criteria” (O’Reilly), as explained above. Again, while those 31 letters are consistent with the larger corpus in terms of
organization, content, and linguistic and rhetorical moves, they were not chosen with as careful
criteria as I might have used if working with the entire corpus. Even as a sample of convenience,
though, the selections made by the NYHS project archivist work in my favor, as, proportionally,
there are far more mothers’ letters and notes in the digitized sample than in the entire corpus; I
have, in other words, more mothers’ letters and notes to work with than if the project archivist
had tried to make the digitized sample representative of the entire corpus.

While it is a limitation of this project that I am not selecting my sample from the entire
1000-letter corpus, there are two important advantages to selecting the sample from the digitized
letters. First, selecting from the digitized sample enables me to return to the original letter
multiple times, allowing for a more detailed analysis and faithful transcription. As previously
discussed, the 1000-letter corpus is only viewable at the New York Historical Society, and I was
unable to reproduce the letters via photographs. Nor did I have enough time in the archive to
transcribe each of the mothers’ letter and notes. Careful analysis of the Foundling mothers’ use
of language and rhetoric requires considerable time with each letter, particularly the ability to
return to each letter multiple times. Selecting this dissertation’s sample from the digitized
sample allows me to return to each letter as many times as needed. The second advantage of
selecting from the digitized sample is that all of the letters analyzed in this dissertation are
available to scholars in the future. One of the contributions that this dissertation makes to
Rhetoric and Composition is to expand the field’s disciplinary portrait of everyday writing and
how it can be studied, particularly how archived everyday writing can be studied. Drawing from
the digitized sample ensures that my sample is accessible to future scholars who would like to
emulate my research methods or do similar work with everyday writing or the rhetoric of
working-class women.
Given the impossibility of selecting from the larger 1000-letter corpus and the advantages of selecting from the digitized sample, this dissertation’s 17-letter sample is selected from the digitized sample; however, the 1000-letter corpus still plays an important role in this project, providing context and enabling me to speak with some specificity about patterns in my 17-letter sample that are shared with the letters in the larger corpus. For example, as mentioned earlier, one of the patterns that is consistent across mothers’ letters in both the corpus and digitized sample is the use of tokens, usually strips of cloth, jewelry, or other small items, that allow the child to be readily identified when the mother returns to claim him or her. Two of the 17 letters included in the sample contain or mention enclosed tokens; however, the number is larger in the entire corpus, indicating that the practice was more widespread than the sample would indicate and allowing me to discuss my two token-bearing letters within that larger context. Using the corpus as context, then, enriches my analysis of the 17-letter sample by indicating the prevalence and significance of patterns in authorship, purpose, and rhetorical and linguistic moves. The full corpus of approximately 1000 letters thus plays an important role in the project even though this dissertation’s sample is selected from the 31 letters digitized on the NYHS Flickr feed.

In selecting the 17 letters for analysis, I used two criteria: 1) that the entire letter be viewable online and 2) that the letter be written by the mother. I only included letters for which a photo of the entire letter is available online so that I could compose my own transcripts, as the transcripts included in the scrapbooks are not always reliable. As illustrated earlier in this section, the Foundling Asylum’s transcriptionist corrected spelling and grammar, streamlined difficult and archaic syntax, and, in some cases, eliminated entire sentences. The need to create my own transcripts unfortunately excluded multipage letters from the sample. Given that the letters were pasted onto the scrapbook page, any writing on the back side of the paper is no
longer visible. There are five such letters in the digitized sample that were excluded from the 17-letter sample, four of which were written by mothers.47

The second, and most important, criterion for inclusion in the dissertation’s sample was that the letter be written by the child’s mother. Based on this criterion, I excluded from the sample four letters of recommendation and introduction that were written and signed by parties other than the child’s mother (such as a doctor or a priest at a church where the child was left) and five short notes for which I could not ascertain authorship.

Ascertaining authorship of the letters in the digitized sample was complicated, as there are no records to confirm whether or not the letters were written by the children’s mothers. So, I used the content and grammar of the letters as guides to help me ascertain authorship. In doing so, I used two basic criteria, and letters are only included in the sample if they contain at least two instances of those criteria. First, I looked at the letter’s signature. Those letters signed with “a momma,” “It’s Mother,” or a variation thereof are included in the sample. Second, where the letter is unsigned or the signature does not indicate motherhood, I looked for phrases in which the author identifies herself as the child’s mother, particularly the use of possessive pronouns that indicate the author’s relationship to the infant and references to motherhood or mothering.

For example, I looked for instances in which the author uses possessive, first-person pronouns to claim the child such as “my baby” or “little outcast son of mine.” I also looked for phrases in which the author references herself in the act of mothering, such as “please take care of my baby for I have no way of keeping it” or “its Poor mother is behold-ing to work the last cent in my possession is one Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it.” Finally, I looked for references to the child’s financial care, as the promise to send money to the infant is common to

47 Based on the portions of the letters that I could read, these incomplete mothers’ letters are quite promising, and I am disappointed that I am unable to include them in the sample.
nearly all mothers’ letters. Promises that “I will come and pay as much as I can every month” and that “all expenses will be paid in full” are common features of mother’ letters. My identification of authorship was confirmed by a second party, who reviewed all 17 letters.

Before concluding this discussion of sample selection, I would like to provide examples of how I determined whether to include a letter in the sample; each of the three letters below presents a different configuration of linguistic clues. The first letter, seen below and written by the mother of Harry S. Babcock, is included in the sample because 1) the letter is signed “It’s Mother” indicating that the letter’s author is Harry’s mother and 2) the author, in the body of the letter, uses the first-person pronoun “I” to refer to herself as Harry’s mother. In other words, the letter contains at least two instances in which the author linguistically identifies herself as Harry’s mother. The second letter, seen below and written by the mother of Mary Dwyre, is included in the sample because, although it is unsigned, it contains at least two linguistic clues that identify Mary’s mother as the author. At the end of the letter is written the following line: “its Poor mother is beholding to work the last cent in my possession is one

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48 Interestingly, promises to provide some kind of financial care were present in five of the 11 fathers’ letters as well, indicating a connection between financial care and the desire for parenthood.
Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it.” The movement in this sentence from third person—“its mother”—to first person—“the last cent in my possession”—implies that the ‘I’ who is willing to give up the much-needed dollar is the “Poor mother behold-ing to work.” Further, the vacillation between first- and third- person pronouns in the letter conforms to the pronoun pattern discussed earlier in this section. It is not uncommon, even in the letters that are signed by a mother, for the Foundling mothers to use first person while discussing themselves as individuals—for example their work or marital status—and to use third person when discussing themselves as mothers. As the example letters above indicate, letters are only included in the sample if there are at least two instances in which the authors identify themselves as mothers.

When a letter or note does not contain at least two linguistic clues, it is not included in the sample even when I suspect that it was written by the mother. The letter left with Reginald Leslie, pictured right, provides an example of such a letter. The letter reads as follows: “This infant’s name is Reginald Leslie born Nov 2nd 1869. Please baptize & take care of him for Christ sake & not for the sake of the

Figure 2.15 Letter left with Mary Dwyre, New York Historical Society.

Figure 2.16 Letter left with Reginald Leslie, New York Historical Society.
unhappy mother-.” The reference to “the unhappy mother” may be an instance in which a mother refers to herself in third person, as many Foundling mothers do, but there is not a second linguistic clue to support this interpretation; thus, the note is not included in the sample.

In sum, this dissertation’s 17-letter sample was selected from the 31-letter digitized sample based on two criteria: 1) the entire letter was visible so that it could be accurately transcribed and 2) the letter was written by the infant’s mother. The 1000-letter collection, from which the digitized sample was drawn, provides context for my analysis of the Foundling Letters in that it provides scope to the linguistic patterns and rhetorical moves. My analysis of these patterns and moves, while influenced by the Foundling Mothers’ larger rhetorical situation, is also influenced by the letters’ status as everyday writing.

2.4 Everyday Writing

This chapter examines the Foundling Letters as artifacts in three ways. In section 2.2, I examined the origin and context of the Foundling Letters. Section 2.3 explored the Letters as historical and material artifacts. In this section, I address the Foundling Letters as artifacts of everyday writing. Everyday writing, in its most basic sense, is that which is written by ordinary people in the course of their everyday lives outside academic and professional contexts (Lillis; Sinor; Lyons; Barton and Hamilton; Powell). Because this basic definition is articulated in detail in the first chapter49, I focus here on three aspects of everyday writing that complicate the basic definition: 1) everyday writing is often written in response to and within networks of institutional power, complicating the boundaries between everyday, professional, and academic writing; 2) everyday writing is often simultaneously everyday and exceptional, a common pushback against

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49 See section 1.4
this dissertation’s definition of everyday writing, and 3) everyday writing is both phemeral and ephemeral, revealing a kind of temporal paradox in which a text can appear to have a certain value in one moment and different value in another.

While these three complicating elements will be the focus of this section, it is worth briefly revisiting the rhetorical purposes of everyday writing in order to provide context. Everyday writing is written by ordinary people—the non-elite, the non-literary, and the non-famous—in order to organize and make sense of their lives, build and sustain social relationships, and compose identities (Lillis; Sinor; Lyons; Barton and Hall; Barton and Hamilton; Powell; Henkin; Hauser and McClelland). In defining these purposes, Teresa Lillis, building from Barton and Hamilton’s work on the social construction of literacy, identifies six categories of rhetorical purposes: organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making, and social participation (77). For each rhetorical purpose, Lillis identifies a group of genres often used to fulfill those purposes. For example, private communication is often accomplished through letters, notes, and emails, documenting life through photo albums, recipe books, and family histories, and sense making through reflective diaries and legal or health research (77). What Lillis’ list does not do is explore the connections between these purposes\(^{50}\), the organization and presentation of the list does not, for example, imply that sense making, personal communication, and documenting life can be done simultaneously or might be implicated in one another. An example of this simultaneity is offered by Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar in her analysis of correspondence between her grandmother and great aunt who wrote to each other across the Iron Curtain between 1956 and 1986. Kurvet-Kaosaar argues that the letters reestablished the bond between the two sisters, who had been separated in

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\(^{50}\) I do not want to imply here that Lillis denies such connections; I simply mean that the organization and presentation of her list does not highlight them.
1944 when the younger sister fled Estonia for the UK as a result of Soviet political persecution, but the letters also served as a space for the younger sister to reify her identity as an Estonian woman by sharing with her sister memories of their homeland and cultural traditions. As the sisters explored together their memories of family members and cultural traditions, their remembrances evoked their shared past—reinvigorating their sisterly bond—and allowed the younger sister, who had been culturally isolated in England and an English family, to articulate and thus reaffirm her cultural identity. These simultaneous purposes of sense making, maintaining social relationships, and constructing identities occur within and between each other. In other words, everyday writing is a space for organizing lives, invigorating social bonds, and building identities, and these purposes are often accomplished simultaneously and across genres.

Although everyday writing’s rhetorical purposes are often personal and expressive, everyday writing itself does not exist in isolation. Everyday writing is often written in relationship to institutional discourses of power and in response to academic and professional institutions. For example, Katrina Powell, in her analysis of the letters of Shenandoah National Park residents detailed in chapter one, illustrates that residents wrote in response to and within the discourses of the federal government. In order to work the land around their homes, residents needed to request permission, as the federal government had seized their land in order to create the park; as they requested permission, residents pushed back against the identities that dominant discourses had created for them in government memos, newspaper articles, and materials to promote the Park’s construction. The Foundling Mothers likewise write their letters in response to the discourses of professional institutions. In addition to securing care for their children by writing to the Foundling Asylum as an institution, they also compose maternal and respectable selves in response to the narrative of the fallen woman, a discursive construction created by a
larger network of institutions such as the church, the press, and public charitable organizations. Thus, as much as everyday writing is situated in everyday lives and defined according to the boundary between everyday, professional, and academic domains, this boundary is not fixed; everyday texts often respond to and are constrained by the larger networks in which they exist.

As the somewhat blurry boundaries between everyday, professional, and academic domains illustrate, defining what is and is not everyday writing can be complex. One concern often voiced about everyday writing is how to differentiate between writing considered everyday and considered exceptional. This distinction is particularly important for the Foundling Letters: they are composed within everyday lives, fulfilling rhetorical and personal purposes often associated with everyday writing, but the letters are written in response to events that may feel extraordinary to the contemporary reader. When presenting the Foundling Letters at conferences or when discussing the project with colleagues, I get frequent questions about why I categorize the Foundling Letters as everyday when surrendering a child would seem an exceptional event in the lives of the Foundling mothers and their families. My colleagues’ understandable question, and by extension the tension between everyday and exceptional, seems to stem from both how everyday is defined and the application of the descriptors everyday or exceptional based on the events which occasioned the writing. When everyday is defined as routine, commonplace, or ordinary—Laurie Langbauer, for example, describes everyday as “the things we cannot read because that are so commonplace as to be boring, to refuse our regard or interpretation” (qtd in Sinor 5)—the presence of some sort of exceptional event would seem to trouble the designation of everyday. In such instances, though, the designation of exceptional is equally slippery. After all, while history, and to a certain extent the perspective of the reader, imbibes events with exceptionality, people make sense of those events as part of their everyday lives through writing.
that, at the time, felt commonplace. The presentism of contemporary readers forgets that the poverty that motivated the Foundling mothers to surrender their children was commonplace in the 19th century; tens of thousands of poor mothers faced impossible choices about how they would feed and shelter their infants, and thousands each year decided to surrender their children to the Foundling Asylum and institutions like it. Although this dissertation focuses on the Foundling Letters, the Protestant Infant Asylum records, also housed at the New York Historical Society, hold hundreds more mothers’ letters and notes, as do the collections of foundling institutions in London, Paris, and other major cities. Further, the problems faced by single, working mothers in 19th century New York City—poverty, abandonment, low pay, lack of child care, social ostracism—were perhaps felt to a greater degree but are not fundamentally different from the problems faced by single, working mothers of the 21st century. In other words, although the events that inspired the Foundling Letters feel exceptional to contemporary readers, they were commonplace in 19th century New York City. The act of making sense of and memorializing those events through writing is very much an ordinary activity, one that is not isolated to the Foundling mothers. Everyday writers worked together to write letters to networks of Japanese-American soldiers as an act of making sense of Japanese internment camps during World War II (Yancey), they wrote newsletters to make sense of protesting nuclear missiles at the Greenham Common Royal Airforce Base (Jolly) in the 1980’s, and they created personal scrapbooks that chronicled the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake alongside other family events (Davis and Yancey). These events seem exceptional to contemporary readers, but the events and the need to contend with them were part of everyday life. The exceptional, in other words, can also be everyday.
The tension between the everyday and the exceptional is also implicated in everyday writing’s ephemeral nature. Some everyday writing theory counts ephemerality and discardability as central characteristics of everyday writing (Sinor; Lillis). Jennifer Sinor, for example, argues that everyday writing is “primarily defined by its nature as discardable” and is “typically unseen or ignored” (5); however, this definition does not account for the volume of everyday writing that is preserved. The Foundling Letters, for example, are archived as part of the Foundling Hospital Collection at the New York Historical Society as part of the Foundling Asylum’s legal records. The letters of the Shenandoah National Park residents analyzed by Katrina Powell are similarly preserved at the park’s headquarters (x). The letters examined by Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar, written between sisters across the Iron Curtain, were kept by the two sisters, organized in neat, twine wrapped bundles (163-164). There is, however, everyday writing that we literally throw away; not many people, for example, hang on to old grocery lists or phone messages. Thus, everyday writing is ephemeral in that it tends to be discarded once it has fulfilled its purpose. Texts that are written to organize lives—such as grocery lists and calendars—tend to be discarded readily as they have accomplished the purpose they are meant to fulfill. However, everyday writing that is integral to sense making, to the development of identity, and to the maintenance of social relationships—such as letters, scrapbooks and their contents, and diaries—tend to hold more value for authors and recipients and are often preserved as the ability to return to such writing is often important to its purpose. The Estonian sisters, for example, would “read again and again, letters that for them provided the strongest proof of each other’s existence and emotional connection” (163-164). The rhetorical purpose of the letters, to maintain their sisterly bond, was not accomplished in a single reading; it required multiple readings over many years. Further, the sisters’ preservation and organization of the letters
facilitated this purpose; the sisters organized their letters chronologically in small bundles, except for the most frequently read and reread letters which were bundled together separately (163-164). The preservation, and relative ephemerality, of the sisters’ letters was tied to their rhetorical purposes. Everyday writing is thus phemeral and ephemeral simultaneously, just as it is both everyday and exceptional.

Everyday writing, as a category, can be difficult to pin down because it is so capacious and has the ability to be and do many things. Broadly defined, everyday writing is that which is written by ordinary people in order to make sense of and organize their lives, maintain social relationships, and create identities (Lillis; Sinor; Lyons; Barton and Hamilton; Powell). Like most writing, though, everyday writing is not isolated, existing in relationship to academic and professional institutions and larger networks of power. Everyday writing is both exceptional and everyday; although the events that sometimes occasion everyday writing—a family member serving overseas, land being seized by the federal government, surrendering a child that cannot be cared for—feel exceptional to contemporary readers, those events and the impulse to use writing in order to understand them were part of the authors’ everyday lives. Finally, everyday writing is simultaneously phemeral and ephemeral, able to be discarded when it has fulfilled its purpose, whether that be the hour it takes to run to the grocery store or a lifetime of maintaining a sisterly and cultural identity. Such theories of everyday writing inform my analysis of the Foundling Letters by providing the tools to account for and value the ordinariness of the Letters as artifacts of everyday writing.

In this chapter, I have examined the Foundling Letters as artifacts in three ways. First, I identified the origins and context of the Foundling Letters using three stories: the social and economic conditions faced by single, working mothers in 19th century New York City, the
history and policies of the Foundling Asylum as an institution, and the Foundling mothers as individuals. Then, I examined the Foundling Letters as historical and material artifacts, explaining how the Letters are archived, how those archival methods influence my analysis, and how this dissertation’s 17-letter sample was selected. Finally, I examined the Foundling Letters as artifacts of everyday writing, identifying how theories of everyday writing allow me to account for the ordinariness of the Foundling Letters. This examination of the Foundling Letters as artifacts explains the lenses through which I analyze the Foundling Letters and the methods I use to do so. The next chapter focuses on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion, reviewing relevant scholarship and identifying the specific strategies used by the Foundling mothers.
CHAPTER THREE

“I AM HIS HART BROKEN MOTHER”: THE FOUNDLING LETTERS AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF DEERENCE AND ASSERTION

3.1 Introduction

On February 5, 1872, a mother who did not sign her letter but describes herself as a “poor lame girl” left her son Charles Sharer at the Foundling Asylum along with a note that reads:

My Dear Friends
Would you be kind anove as for to take good care of this baby as i am a poor lame girl and not able to take care of it and the father of it gone away what i don’t no where. the baby is born on the 30th day of November and chrısent on the 8 of December name Charles Sharer. Please take care of this baby and God bless you.

In her letter, the poor lame girl uses a common rhetorical strategy of deference—framing oneself as weak or as a helpless victim of circumstance (Daybell; Fitzpatrick).

Rhetorical strategies of deference are those that appeal to a perceived inferiority, whether that inferiority is based on gender, class, religion, race, or culture (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay) and draw their rhetorical effectiveness from the unequal power relationship invoked between author and addressee. In describing herself as a “poor lame girl” Charles’ mother calls attention to a physical handicap that frames her as weak and as unable to care for her child while simultaneously implying that the Sisters of Charity do not share her handicap and will be able to care for Charles.
At the same time that she defers, however, the poor lame girl also asserts herself as Charles’ mother and as a respectable woman. Rhetorical strategies of assertion are those that appeal to equality and/or refute inferiority (Daybell; Whyman; Wall; Sonmez; Tebeaux and Lay), attempting to subvert the unequal power relationship between author and addressee. The poor lame girl composes a role for herself as Charles’ mother by attempting to control the quality of care he receives in the Foundling Asylum. She specifies in her letter’s opening line that the Sisters take “good care” of her son, subtly setting an expectation that she hopes the Sisters will fulfill and asserting her authority as Charles’ mother.

The balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion seen in the poor lame girl’s letter is the primary means through which the Foundling mothers compose maternal and respectable selves. Before I illustrate and analyze this dynamic balance in chapters four and five, I would like to more fully explore strategies of deference and assertion individually. Thus, in this chapter, I enumerate the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used in the 17 Foundling Letters that make up this dissertation’s sample and examine how those strategies function separately. I begin by unpacking the basic definitions of deference and assertion articulated above and offered in chapter one\textsuperscript{51}, focusing on four concerns: 1) the development of this dissertation’s definitions of deference and assertion based on relevant scholarship; 2) that scholarship’s tendency to characterize deference as a female or feminine strategy in spite of men’s documented use of deference; 3) the importance of concerns other than gender, such as class and religion, in how and why female writers defer and 4) assertion’s role in deference, as scholarship often conceptualizes assertion as a contrasting rather than complementary strategy to deference. Having discussed rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion as concepts, I then

\textsuperscript{51} See section 1.2.2 of chapter one.
identify and analyze the individual rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used across this dissertation’s 17-letter sample, explaining 15 specific strategies: three that are used only to defer, four that are used only to assert, and eight that are used to both defer and assert depending upon the Foundling mothers’ individual rhetorical goals. In sum, this chapter, focusing on how the Foundling mothers use deferent and/or assertive strategies separately, sets the stage for my examination of the dynamic movement between the two, which is explored through case studies in chapters four and five.

3.2 Rhetorical Strategies of Deference and Assertion: A Review of Scholarship

The Foundling mothers have two primary rhetorical purposes in their letters\(^52\): 1) to secure care for their infants in the Foundling Asylum and 2) to argue for their worth as mothers and as women. The Foundling mothers accomplish these goals through the balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and of assertion. Before identifying and analyzing the specific deferent and assertive strategies used by the Foundling mothers, it is necessary to discuss rhetorical deference and assertion in more detail. In chapter one and in the introduction to this chapter, I offered a basic definition of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion: rhetorical strategies of deference are those that appeal to a perceived inferiority, whether that inferiority is based on gender, class, culture, and/or religion; in contrast, rhetorical strategies of assertion refute that inferiority and/or appeal to equality (Daybell; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez; Fitzpatrick; Powell). Below, I unpack this definition, focusing on four concerns. First, I identify the origins of this dissertation’s definitions of deference and assertion. Most scholarship on deference does not articulate a direct, explicit definition of deference; however, scholars label as deferent a group of

\(^{52}\) I recognize that there are other rhetorical purposes that are common to the Foundling Letters and specific to individual Foundling mothers; however, this dissertation focuses on the shared rhetorical purposes listed here.
strategies from which I extrapolated a definition. Second, I explore deference as a ‘feminine’ rhetorical strategy. Although scholars (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Tebeaux and Lay) admit that both women and men defer, deference is still labeled as ‘feminine’ because of its close association with women’s academic and everyday writing and with gendered conceptions of women. Third, I discuss factors other than gender to which female writers defer. Women’s positionality is complex, and the Foundling mothers defer not just as women, but as women of a specific class and within a specific culture. Finally, I conclude this section by demonstrating assertion’s role in deference. Scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion tends to focus primarily on deference, using assertion as a contrasting element to further clarify the definition and importance of deference. Thus, this literature review focuses primarily on deference before concluding with a demonstration of assertion’s role in deference.

Deference is a common rhetorical strategy in women’s everyday, academic, and professional writing across multiple historical periods from the Early Modern era to the Victorian era to the Great Depression in both English and non-English speaking countries (Daybell; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez; Milne; Fitzpatrick; Powell; Vasquez). Although much scholarship on and analyses of women’s writing, both academic and everyday, does not define the term deference, they label as deferent a set of strategies from which a definition can be extrapolated. James Daybell, for example, lists three strategies of deference common to Early Modern female letter writers: “tropes of female weakness and fragility for strategic effect; emphasis on the plight of widows; [and] the duty of wives, mothers, and kinswomen to intervene

53 The majority of the analyses cited in this literature review focus specifically on women’s letter writing; however, a few are included that analyze women’s academic writing as well. These sources are included because they provide clear definitions of particular deferent and/or assertive strategies that the analyses of women’s letters do not address. As such, I have worked to specify where claims are based on sources that analyze only letters or on sources that analyze both letters and academic writing.
Historian Susan Whyman describes as deferent the ways in which Early Modern single gentlewomen secured their place in patriarchal hierarchies by flattering the family patriarch and emphasizing their dependence upon and gratitude for his patronage. Linguist Margaret J.M. Sonmez situates deference in the types of words used in requests, arguing that Early Modern women were more likely than men to use request markers that denote their inferiority to their addressees, such as *crave, implore, request,* and *beg* (17).

Historian Alison Wall, analyzing the letters of the Early Modern aristocratic Thynne family, describes as deferent greetings in which women simultaneously flatter, express their loyalty to, and acknowledge their inferiority to their addressees, typically their husbands, fathers, and social betters. Elizabeth Tebaeux and Mary M. Lay, in their groundbreaking analysis of Renaissance women academic writers, present couching, or the veiling of arguments using appeals to feminine gender roles—such as that of a wife or mother—or to women’s second-class status (54), although they do not explicitly use the term deference. Sheila Fitzpatrick, analyzing letters written by Soviet citizens in the 1930s, identifies several deferent strategies: representing themselves as “weak and powerless” (83), casting themselves as victims of circumstances beyond their control, appealing to their identities as mothers, and appealing to the duties and responsibilities held by their addressees as superiors in the Soviet governmental hierarchy.

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54 This literature review, and by extension this dissertation’s definitions of deference and of assertion, relies considerably on studies of Early Modern writing; the majority of the scholarship on deference in women’s letter writing is focused on the Early Modern period because of the importance that social deference played in elite Early Modern society and its correspondence. However, I have taken care to also review studies of deference in other periods of history, such as the Victorian Era and the Depression. Further, I have used the definition of deference offered in scholarship on Early Modern letters to seek out deference in other historical periods and to examine how more contemporary uses of deference reinforce and contradict the examples offered in Early Modern letters. That said, the scholarship on Early Modern letters is cited in more detail in this review as the examples offered in this scholarship are clearer—and by extension more concisely rendered—and more illustrative than some of the examples from other periods.
Although each of these studies differs, the rhetorical strategies described as deferent share two characteristics: 1) each is premised on the inferiority of the author and superiority of the addressee and 2) each is based on gendered conceptions of women. The second characteristic I address later in this section; presently, I would like to focus on deferent strategies’ basis in the perceived inferiority of the author. Each of the strategies outlined above derives its rhetorical effectiveness from identifying a perceived inferiority on the part of the author and/or from invoking an unequal power relationship between the author and addressee. For example, when James Daybell’s Early Modern letter writers describe their feminine frailty, they mark themselves as physically and emotionally inferior to their male addressees who do not share their frailty. When Fitzpatrick’s Soviet letters writers cast themselves as victims of circumstances beyond their control and request help from male Soviet officials, they imply that the officials can control those circumstances and thus are not victims.

Rhetorical strategies of deference appeal to a perceived inferiority and invoke the unequal power relationships between author and addressee, and as such it is important to note that, while letter writers’ deferent appeals may represent the realities of their situations, this appeal and invocation is also a rhetorical performance (Daybell; Powell; Whyman; Wall; Miller) in which the authors use cultural and social perceptions about them to their rhetorical advantage. For example, in her brief discussion of letters left with infants at the Foundling Asylum and at the Protestant Infant Asylum, historian Julie Miller cites a note left with John Green, an infant abandoned at the home of a wealthy family in 1840, that ended with the line “I cant [write] ane

I identify Miller’s analysis as brief because the letters are not a significant part of her historical examination of foundlings in antebellum New York City. Miller uses the content of the letters as support for her identification of the social factors that led mothers to abandon their infants, but she mentions the letters sparingly and does not analyze their rhetorical effectiveness or approach them as texts.

Prior to the establishment of the founding homes in the late 1860s and early 1870s, it was not uncommon for infants to the left at the homes of the wealthy in the hopes that the children would be taken in (Miller).
more” (28). The same line is seen in an undated Foundling Letter left with Julia R. Hudson; Julia’s mother ends her letter with line “I am not able to write any more.” The evidence that two letters written at least 30 years apart—the Foundling Asylum did not open until 1869, so the undated letter written by Julia’s mother could not have been composed before that time—used such similar phrasing implies that the physical or emotional weakness invoked by the phrase “I cannot write anymore” is at least on some level a performance. The phrase, as Miller notes, circulated through epistolary and literary models of the period (27-28), meaning that the mothers of John Green and Julia Hudson used a common trope to express their emotions. Their borrowing from models to appeal to their feminine frailty and to use their emotions as a rhetorical strategy does not mean that those emotions are not genuine or that the stories the mothers told were untrue. In other words, strategies of deference are simultaneously performances and genuine expressions of desperation and grief.

As scholarship notes, the deference rhetorically performed by female writers is often based on gendered conceptions of women. Scholarship typically identifies deference as a primarily female or feminine strategy perhaps because of its prevalence in women’s writing, as examples of deference can be seen in women’s letter writing—as well as women’s professional and academic writing—in multiple historical periods (Daybell; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez; Milne; Fitzpatrick; Powell; Vasquez). Looking across this scholarship, two main threads emerge as to why deference is configured as a feminine strategy: 1) women had, and still have, fewer freedoms than do men about when, how, and what they can write and 2) the inferiority associated with deference—particularly weakness and victimhood—is coded as feminine rather than as masculine according to traditional gender roles.
The first thread of scholarship grounds deference in women’s need to justify something about their writing, whether that be the fact that women are writing at all, that they are claiming authority of some kind, or that they are writing in fields or about subjects that are considered inappropriate for women. In such circumstances, female authors use deference to disguise or contextualize their arguments in order to make them more palatable to a potentially skeptical or even hostile audience. The clearest articulation of this use of deference is seen in Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay’s analysis of Renaissance women writers. Tebeaux and Lay identify the writers’ primary rhetorical strategy as couching, or disguising arguments behind feminine “gender role[s] such as advice on mothering or…defuse[ing] criticism of their efforts by seeming to accept the ‘weaknesses’ of their sex” (53). As an example, Tebeaux and Lay offer a published letter written by Elizabeth Caldwell that details the abuse suffered at the hands of the husband who left her in poverty to travel the world and why that abuse led to her infidelity and attempted murder of him. Caldwell begins her letter by casting herself as the repentant sinner, or by foregrounding her moral inferiority in relationship to both the husband to whom the letter is addressed and the larger public audience that Caldwell is aware will read the letter. However, expressing her guilt is not Caldwell’s true purpose: “as her letter unfolds, we can see her real purpose…her letter clearly shows that she believes her husband is the vilest of sinners and that she is justified in poisoning him” (Tebeaux and Lay 64). Although Caldwell admits weakness, she “describes her weakness as coming not primarily from her nature but from [her husband’s] absence and her resulting poverty” (64). In other words, Caldwell defers in order to make palatable an argument about the consequences of domestic abuse and abandonment, an argument that can be read as an assertion of her rights as a wife and woman.
A similar, if less sensational, example of couching is provided by Esther Mine, who analyzes the letters written between Mary Russell Mitford, a young English author who published in the early 19th century, and her mentor Sir William Elford, who, in addition to being much older and married, was of a higher social class. Milne posits that at the root of Mitford and Elford’s “epistolary liaison” was a deep romantic love, one that it would have been impossible to express directly. Thus, in writing to each other, Mitford and Elford use a variety of artifices to couch expressions of love and desire. In one such letter, Elford writes to Mitford with a supernatural tale in which an Arabian man had given Elford a crystal ball that “rendered the possessor invisible and…transported him whither he willed” (83), a gift that Elford uses to visit Mitford:

You several times in contemplation spoke aloud, unconscious of being observed, and seemed to refer to…some poem which, I suppose, you had lately produced, and which, from some lines you repeated, seemingly with a view to alter them, appeared to me to be exquisitely beautiful…I could hardly help laughing at your starting once or twice at a little bustle which my moving occasioned, and one particularly, as I approached so near as very slightly to touch you. (83)

This imagined encounter establishes a nearly physical, subtly erotic relationship in which Elford functions as the superior, as an unseen observer whose movements and desires control those of Mitford’s. In her reply, Mitford plays along, reinforcing this relationship and Elford’s superiority, as well as her own girlish frailty:

I was frightened though you will not believe me, and looked about the room, and searched, and listened, as though you were actually present to witness the effect of your letter. Nay, I have been as nervous as a fine lady ever since; and yesterday, being gathering violets in a hedge, and finding myself pulled back from behind, I turned round in great glee, expecting to see you…and was quite disappointed to see nothing but the stump of an old tree which had made a great rent in my gown. (85)

Mitford here matches Elford’s story with one of her own in which he is still the superior, unseen observer and she is the skittish, excitable girl who welcomes his superiority. This exchange and
the relationship it establishes are couched under the artifice of a silly, supernatural story, but the story is nonetheless an expression of a desire to be together. It would be impossible, however, for Mitford as a woman to explicitly reveal such desires no matter how directly Elford may address them; so, she creates a silly story that allows her to accept his superiority, to play the role of the nervous young girl, and to express her wish that he would pull her back from behind.

In the examples of deference and couching illustrated by Caldwell and Mitford, the female letter writers defer because some aspect of their argument—the thesis, the addressee, the topic, the fact that an argument is being made at all—is seen as unsuitable for women but would not be seen as unsuitable for men; thus, the female letter writers must couch or disguise their arguments in acceptable gender roles in order to fulfill their rhetorical goals.

The second thread of scholarship focused on women’s use of deference ties rhetorical strategies of deference to letters of petition written by both men and women, in which authors defer to an addressee to gain favor, to make themselves seem deserving or in great need of their request, or to remind the addressee of his or her duties and/or generosity. Sheila Fitzpatrick offers a strong example of this use of deference in her analysis of letters of petition written in Soviet Russia during the 1930s. Fitzpatrick notes that writers of such letters “usually represented themselves as weak and powerless, victims of a ‘bitter fate’ and adverse circumstances” (83-84). One such letter was written by a single mother who hoped to find for her young son either a bed in a nearby orphanage or a place in the army: “I haven’t even got enough for bread’ she wrote ‘my son and I go hungry, everything has been sold. I have no bedding left, no pillows, and both of us are barefoot and in rags” (Fitzpatrick 84). In framing herself as poor, as pitiful, and as out of options, the mother simultaneously appeals to her own victimhood, to the sympathy of the male Soviet official, and to his sense of duty. A similar rhetorical strategy is used by James
Daybell’s Early Modern letter writers. Arabella Stuart, who had been imprisoned by Queen Elizabeth, wrote to Henry Brounkner in March 1603 expressing her melancholy state: “I thinck the time best spent in tiring you with the idle conceits of my travelling minde till it make you ashamed to see into what a scribling melancholy (which is a kinde of madnesse and theare are severall kindes of it) you have brought me and leave me, if you leave me till I be my owne woman and then your trouble and mine too will cease” (Daybell 13). Stuart here, and elsewhere in her letter, illustrates deference as she details her physical and emotional weakness; however, she is also interestingly direct about her use of deference as a rhetorical strategy, highlighting for Brounkner the purpose of her “scribbling melancholy.” Thus, in letters of petition, female authors often appeal to their own inferiority, to the addressee’s sympathy, and to the addressee’s sense of duty in order to further their own rhetorical goals.

These uses of deference, though, are not exclusive to women. Although Daybell notes that men as well as women defer to addressees with whom they share an unequal power relationship—a point also noted by Fitzpatrick and Whyman—he still describes such tactics as the use of a “feminine voice” (4). The casting of oneself as weak or vulnerable—described by Daybell as “groveling”—is thus characterized as feminine rather than masculine (4). One reason for describing weakness-based deference as feminine may be that it takes advantage of existing tropes and cultural assumptions about women (Daybell; Tebeaux and Lay) as physically and emotionally fragile; however, another reason may be that, although male letter writers do defer, they do so differently than women. When men defer, their appeals to inferiority are not usually based on weakness or negative qualities that are inherent to men. When men discuss their inferior status, they do so based on external structures, such as social hierarchies, patriarchal family structures, or economic structures. After all, one can be inferior based on rigid social
structures, family position, or inherited wealth without being physically or emotionally weak or powerless. For example, Daybell briefly discusses the use of deference in letters between two aristocratic men, William Lord Burghley who was knighted in 1571 and Sir Julius Caesar who was not knighted until 1603. This inequality in social status meant that Caesar deferred to Burghley in most of their correspondence, primarily through his letters’ greetings. Caesar addresses his letters to “‘my very good lord’, ‘my singular good lord’, and ‘right honourable’” thus illustrating the proper deference to and praise of Burghley (9); although Caesar here defers to Burghley’s higher station, he does not do so by referencing any kind of weakness or vulnerability on his part. In other words, the focus is on Burghley’s superior position rather than Caesar’s inferior one. In addition to appealing to external social structures, men also defer by using flattery, focusing on the beauty, intelligence, kindness, and generosity of their superior addressees, whether male or female, rather than on their own potential inferiority. Historian Alison Wall offers an example in her analysis of the letters of the Thynne family women, in particular a letter to Lady Thynne from James Croft, the soon-to-be-knighted son of a courtier who was of a slightly lower social standing than Lord and Lady Thynne. Declaring his loyalty to the Thynnes during a long estate dispute, Croft writes “an unusually obsequious response to thank her”: “a welcomer guest never came unto me…leaving myself always at yor devote[on] to persue the love and honest office of a poore frende” (Wall 84). Croft emphases his loyalty to and love for Lady Thynne, but does not reference any weakness or inferiority on his part. While he recognizes that he is a “poore frende,” this inferiority is based on a social system and inherited wealth that places him on a slightly lower rung than Lady Thynne or her husband. Men, in other words, do not tend to defer based on an inferiority or weakness that is inherent to men; female writers, in contrast, do make rhetorical use of such gendered conceptions of women even though
they may not always sincerely believe those conceptions. To conclude, deference is identified as a female strategy in the sense that 1) it is primarily used by women because they faced greater restrictions on what, how, and when they could write and 2) its basis in inferiority is culturally coded as feminine.

While gender is a central concern of deference as a rhetorical strategy, it is not the only concern; rhetorical strategies of deference operate along multiple simultaneous axes such as gender, class, and religion. Often, as illustrated in chapter two in my discussion of the social conditions faced by single, working-class mothers in Victorian New York City, conceptions of gender, class, culture, and religion influence each other. Thus, when female writers defer, they do not just defer as women, but as women of a specific class within a specific culture (O’Day). These intersections can be seen in Susan Whyman’s analysis of the letters of the unmarried Verney women who, with neither husbands nor the dowries to entice them, served as companions in the homes of wealthier relations or family friends who employed the women at the request of the family patriarch, Sir Ralph Verney. The Verney women’s position marks them as inferior in multiple ways: first, they were women; second, they were single women with little hope of marriage, which degraded their position even further as they could not contribute to the family financially or through the political connections that came with a savvy marriage; and third, they were gentlewomen, making their positions even more precarious as they had no funds to support themselves and their gentility precluded them from work. Thus, the Verney sisters were dependents. With little to offer their family in the way of money or social connection, they needed the favor of Sir Ralph, the family patriarch, to survive. In order to curry that favor, the single women, in exchange for the patriarch’s patronage, served as household spies, reporting back to Sir Ralph the activities of the families with whom they lived. Thus, in writing to Sir
Ralph, the Verney women defer not just as women, but as poor, single women of reduced social positions within a patriarchal system of patronage. For example, after she was dismissed from the home in which she had been serving as companion, Peg Adams wrote to Sir Ralph in the hopes that he might help her regain her position: “I could not forbear troubling you with an account of anything which happens to me in my little affairs since you have been pleased to give me the freedom of doing it” (183-184). Here Peg appeals to her inferior status—as a poor, single woman within the family—by highlighting the ways in which her “little affairs” should not be important to a man like Sir Ralph, who obviously deals with issues more significant than Peg’s position. In other words, Peg implies that her actual livelihood is of less significance than any of Sir Ralph’s other affairs. As she defers, however, Peg also reminds Sir Ralph of the duty he has toward her. In referencing “the freedom” that Sir Ralph has given her to write to him, Peg asserts her position in the family as Sir Ralph’s loyal and diligent spy who has been using her “freedom” to report valuable information about the family with whom she lives. In other words, Peg creates a complex positionality that allows her to “defend her reputation…[and] maintain her place in [Sir Ralph’s] network” without losing his favor, as, having no other income, she needed his patronage to survive (Whyman 184).

Peg Adams defers based on a complex positionality, as does Rebecca Baugher, whose letter is analyzed by Katrina Powell in her study of the letters written by residents of the Shenandoah National Park during the Park’s construction in the 1930s. Rebecca defers not just as a woman, but as a poor woman of good character whose audience views her as inferior because of the region in which she lives. The federal government, in constructing the Park, was responsible for relocating SNP residents, a slow process. As residents were relocated their homes stood vacant until they count be demolished. Rebecca, who remained in the Park, wrote
to Park engineer Ralph Lassiter to ask that she be allowed to use materials from the vacant homes to repair her home: “the house I live in is 3 small room and they are not one piece of it plain lumber all rough” (83). In describing the dilapidated nature of her home, Rebecca foregrounds her poverty, deferring to Lassiter as a poor woman. She then further defers by describing the inferior quality of the lumber that she hopes to obtain. Since such wood is not good enough to be of use to the Park, she writes “I hope you Had rather give it to me then for them to burn it up” (83). By directly stating that lumber of inferior quality is still desirable to her and her family, Rebecca further establishes her inferiority based on her own poverty. While her letter does contain moments of deference, Rebecca also works compose an identity as a deserving and respectable person, first by appealing to her husband’s position as a veteran of World War I: “My Husband was a vuterin in the World War and He never had got a thing” (83). Positioning herself as the wife of a veteran who did not receive payment for his sacrifice illustrates how much she deserves that little bit of scrap lumber. Then, Rebecca pushes back against the dominant view of the Park residents as uneducated, unscrupulous people by emphasizing that she asked permission to take the wood, rather than just removing the materials from the other homes: “I wouldn’t go ahead and take things and not ask you all for them” (83). Rebecca characterizes herself as an honest person who follows the rules, creating a division between her character and the perceived character of Park residents. In sum, Rebecca constructs a positionality for herself in which she defers not as a weak woman, but as a poor, deserving, and respectable woman.

Like Rebecca and Peg Adams, the Foundling mothers defer not just as women, but as poor, working-class Catholic women who are surrendering their infants. This complex positionality is well illustrated by two Foundling Letters from the 1000-letter corpus, the first of
which was left with two-year-old John Samuels, who was older than most children left at the Foundling Asylum (Sisters of Charity), and reads as follows:

This child was baptized in 59th street church the 24th day of next June he will be two years old i had to pay for him ever since his birth they did not care him right his lung is effected i have given all i have for that child to keep him but i have to give him up at last i hope not for ever [sentence unreadable because of a fold in the paper] i thought that i lived for him he is all i have on this world he is two sick or i would beg with him but i hope that i will get him again before very long i hope that god will spare him his life i will write to you again

In her letter, John’s mother’s deference, like that of many Foundling mothers, incorporates her poverty into her womanhood and motherhood; she frames herself and John as weak, but that weakness has as much to do with poverty as with gender. She mentions, for example, that she “had to pay for him” and that “they did not care him right,” implying that she had been paying for John’s board with a nurse or baby farmer—a common practice for 19th century single mothers in New York who wanted to keep their babies—who did not take good care of John and allowed him to fall ill—unfortunately also a common practice among 19th century baby farmers in New York City (Miller). Her later mention of begging with John were he not too ill further reinforces both her poverty and the perceived inferior position in which it has placed her. This reference also serves to illustrate her hardworking nature, an assertion against her inferiority; after all, she tried for nearly two years to keep John, but the nurses worked against her and now the baby, through no fault of her own, is too sick for her to provide care and still work to survive. A similar positionality is illustrated by the mother of Moses and Mary Petronella Lee, who did

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57 Baby farmers were women who would board and care for infants for a fee (Miller 7). Because the practice was unregulated, it was not uncommon for infants to suffer from neglect at the hands of their nurses, as the children would not have been seen daily by their parents. Just prior to the opening of the foundling homes in the late 1860s, New York saw a series of scandals in which infants were severely neglected or killed by baby farmers who continued to collect money from their parents or who did the same with the parent’s tacit but unspoken knowledge, getting rid of the child for a one-time payment. The bad reputation of baby farmers increased public support for the establishment of foundling homes (Miller 150-151). There were, of course, also baby farmers who were kind, devoted women who did they best they could in caring for their charges.
not date the letter left with her twins, positioning herself not just as a woman, but as a poor but respectable woman:

This little boy and girl are twins they are not baptized their mother is a poor respectable woman married by father McMahon her husband has deserted her long ago and she is delicate her name is Eliza Lee there fathers name is William

Eliza here defers by referencing a perceived inferiority as a “delicate” woman—a word choice that seems ideal to describe her as simultaneously feminine and weak but not as improper or coarse—who has been deserted, but she also emphasizes her poverty and respectability. The figure of a poor, delicate, deserted women would, according to the narrative of the fallen woman, seem to imply that Eliza is also single or that her children are illegitimate; however, Eliza clearly refutes this implication, spending at least half of her letter describing her respectable marriage, naming the priest who married her and her husband but not, interestingly, naming her twins. The names Moses and Mary Petronella Lee were written at the top of the note by the Foundling staff, but are not mentioned within Eliza’s letter itself. The mothers of John Samuels and the Lee twins defer, in other words, not just as women but as poor, respectable women, articulating a complex positionality. As the letters written by John’s mother and Eliza Lee, Rebecca Baugher, and the Verney women illustrate, deference is not focused on gender alone, although gender plays a significant role. Rather, women writers defer based on a constellation of social factors.

This review has thus far focused on deference as a rhetorical strategy because the majority of the scholarship on deferent strategies does not discuss the role that assertion might play in those strategies. What little discussion exists tends to theorize assertion as the opposite of deference, typically using assertive letters to illustrate a lack of deference or as an opposite against which to define deference. For example, historian Alison Wall, in her analysis of the Thynne family letters uses the assertive letters of Joan and Maria Thynne to contrast their
deferent letters, illustrating the circumstances that precipitate the change from deferent to assertive. Maria was Joan’s daughter-in-law, although she came from a family of higher social status than the Thynnes, but the two were not close, as Maria’s marriage to Joan’s son Thomas took place without Joan’s knowledge or approval. Whyman presents a letter dated shortly after Maria’s marriage to Thomas in which she attempts to smooth things over with her mother-in-law: “To you my dearly loved mother are these lines sent from her that hath vowed to make herself as worthy as her best service can make her, of so kind a mother as yourself . . . I crave nothing but your good opinion, which I will be...thankful for...your loving and obedient daughter” (87). Maria’s imploring language and vivid praise of her mother-in-law, alongside her description of herself as “obedient,” emphasizes Joan’s superior position in the family and Maria’s recognition of that position. In other words, while Maria defers to Joan—or at least invokes tropes of the era meant to give the appearance of deference—she does so based on social and familial power structures rather than a perceived inferiority or weakness on her part. A few years after this letter, Joan’s husband passed away, leaving Thomas as the head of the family.

The character of Maria’s letters changed along with her status within the family:

I confess (without shame) it is true my garden is too ruinous, and yet to make you more merrier you shall be of my counsel, that my intent is, before it be better, to make it worse. For . . . I intend to plough it up and sow all variety of fruit at a fit season...Now, whereas you write your ground put to basest uses, is better manured than my garden, surely if it were a grandmother of my own and equal to myself by birth, I should answer that odious comparison with telling you I believe so corpulent a Lady cannot but do much yourself towards the soiling of land, and I think that hath been, and will be all the good you intend to leave behind you at Corsley (89).

This letter, sarcastic and cutting, clearly asserts Maria’s newly elevated social status as head of the Thynne family as well as her superior birth, as Whyman notes: “There is a lot more of this sarcasm, in total contrast to the earlier simpering reconciliation letters. No humility here, no deference, but a defiant riposte, stressing Maria's higher status by birth” (89). Whyman is, of
course, not wrong in noting the contrast between the two letters, but in using assertion solely to contrast deference, she fails to mention the moments of assertion in the earlier letter. While Maria, in her early letter to Joan, does note that she hopes to be “as worthy as her best service can make her,” she stops short of describing herself as weak or vulnerable, instead using the deferent tropes of the era to appeal to the relationship she shares with Joan. In other words, there are moments of assertion, however veiled.

Like Susan Whyman, Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her study of letters written to Soviet leaders in the 1930s, casts the letters as either deferent supplicant letters or assertive citizen letters. Supplicant letters are those in which the authors, usually women and children, presented themselves as “victims and dwelt on their miseries and misfortunes…supplicants’ letters might ask for justice as well as mercy, but they do not invoke rights” (103). Citizen letters, in contrast, utilized a language of comradeship in which letter writers, usually men, invoked their status as members of the Soviet Communist party, “using the language of rights and among the rights they implicitly claimed was the right to be heard” (104). Citizen letters, which denounced neighbors, reported corrupt public officials, or offered political opinions as well as made requests, were ostensibly written for the “public good” which gave their authors a sense of authority (104). Fitzpatrick writes that “it is helpful to think of letter-writers in two major categories, ‘supplicants’ and ‘citizens’” (103), thus creating a clear division between more deferent and more assertive letters and using the definition of one to contrast the other. Although Fitzpatrick is careful to note that “some writers attempted to blend the intimacy of comradeship with that of supplication” the note is a small one. While I do not intend here to admonish Fitzpatrick for not attending to the ways in which deference and assertion worked simultaneously, as this is not what her article set out to do, she does provide a strong example of the ways in which deference
and assertion are often configured as contrasting rather than as complementary rhetorical strategies. This dissertation addresses this gap and focuses on the ways in which deference and assertion can complement each other.

3.3 Rhetorical Strategies of Deference and Assertion in the Foundling Letters

In order to understand how the Foundling mothers use deference and assertion as complementary strategies, it is important to first understand the specific deferent and/or assertive strategies used in the Foundling Letters. Thus, having explicated rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion as a concept, I now turn to the Foundling Letters themselves. In this section, I identify and analyze the specific rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used by the Foundling mothers. First, I review the strategies that the Foundling mother use only for deference, each of which is premised on their weakness or fragility as poor, single mothers. Second, I analyze strategies that the mothers use solely for assertion, each of which asserts their roles as respectable mothers. Finally, I review the strategies that the Foundling mother use for both deference and assertion, the use of which varies depending upon the mothers’ individual rhetorical goals.

I identified these strategies through a three-step process informed by the scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion outlined in the literature review that began this chapter along with the three stories and theories of everyday writing outlined in chapter two. Using this tripartite lens, I individually analyzed each of the 17 Foundling Letters in this dissertation’s sample twice, noting the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used, as well as how those strategies worked in tandem. Second, using the results of the individual

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58 See sections 2.2 and 2.4 in chapter two.
analyses, I made a list of strategies that were used in at least two letters, a total of 15 strategies. Third, I returned to the individual letters, analyzing them for a third time and focusing on the 15 strategies in order to determine the number of letters that use each strategy and the number of times they do so. Thus, this section serves to 1) provide detailed examples that further illustrate how rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion function; 2) illustrate the range of strategies used by the Foundling mothers as well as how those strategies vary in their degree of deference and assertion; and 3) to identify individual strategies so that I can discuss in chapters four and five how those strategies work in tandem. Photos and transcripts all of 17 letters can be found in the appendix; however, I have also included a table below that lists the names of each Foundling mother and child, as well as the dates on which their letters were written, so that this information can be easily referenced during the analysis below.

Table 3.1 List of Foundling Letters included in sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Mother’s Name</th>
<th>Child’s Name</th>
<th>Dated of Letter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The heart broken mother</td>
<td>John Larkin</td>
<td>Undated (1869-1876)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The Catholic mother</td>
<td>Theodore Walters</td>
<td>Undated (1869-1884)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The General Grant mother</td>
<td>Willie</td>
<td>Undated (1870-1873)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The mother who cannot write anymore</td>
<td>Julia R Hudson</td>
<td>Undated (1869-1876)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A momma</td>
<td>A momma</td>
<td>Willie C</td>
<td>January 14, 1877</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59 Strategies used by only a single letter in the sample are not included in this list.
60 For the unsigned letters, I provided each mother with a name based on the way she describes herself or a unique feature of her letter. I named the mothers for two reasons. First, I wanted to emphasize the mothers’ agency by using the names they had given themselves in their letters, which meant that the mothers who did not sign their letters needed names. Second, not naming the mothers whose letters were unsigned and referring to them as “Charles’ mother” or “Willie’s mother” became confusing in practice.
61 Throughout this chapter, I have also included images of the 12 letters not presented as case studies in chapters four and five. Images of the remaining 5 letters are included in the chapter in which they are analyzed.
62 For undated letters, I used the NYHS Guide to the Records of the Foundling Hospital, which provides the approximate dates of the letters in each scrapbook.
### Table 3.1 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Mother’s Name</th>
<th>Child’s Name</th>
<th>Date of Letter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa Perazzo</td>
<td>Theresa Perazzo</td>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>December 3, 1874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Sturges</td>
<td>Mary Sturges</td>
<td>Harry Sturges</td>
<td>March 5, 1877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnie Smith</td>
<td>Minnie Smith</td>
<td>James Smith</td>
<td>March 13, 1877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His Mother</td>
<td>His Mother</td>
<td>Unnamed Son</td>
<td>Undated (1869-1884)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Cooper</td>
<td>Mrs. Cooper</td>
<td>Walter Cooper</td>
<td>February 21, 1871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Its Mother</td>
<td>Its Mother</td>
<td>Harry S Babcock</td>
<td>September 14, 1871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The mother who specified time of birth</td>
<td>Emma Jane</td>
<td>March 1, 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The last request mother</td>
<td>Harry Oliver</td>
<td>October 9, 1876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The anonymous mother</td>
<td>Joseph Cavalier</td>
<td>April 6 (1870-1873)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The beseeching mother</td>
<td>Mary Dwyre</td>
<td>March 4, 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The poor lame girl</td>
<td>Charles Sharer</td>
<td>February 5, 1872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsigned</td>
<td>The nameless mother</td>
<td>Cathrine Betchind</td>
<td>Undated (1869-1871)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3.1 Rhetorical Strategies that the Foundling Mothers Use Only to Defer

Among the rhetorical strategies used by the Foundling mothers, there are three rhetorical strategies used only for deference: 1) appeals to the perceived physical, moral, and/or emotional weakness of mother and/or child, 2) characterization of the mother and/or child as victims of circumstances beyond their control, and 3) expression of the inability to financially support the child. Each of these strategies is based on the perceived weakness and victimhood of the mothers and their children, emphasizing that both mother and child need and deserve the Sisters’ help. Although these three strategies are associated primarily with deference, it is important to remember that they are used in letters that also contain moments of assertion.
**Strategy #1: Appeals to the Perceived Physical, Emotional, and/or Moral Weakness of Mother and Child.** The Foundling mothers, in securing care for their children, frequently defer by referencing some kind of physical, emotional, or moral weakness on the part of themselves or their children, a rhetorical strategy frequently used in women’s letters of petition (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Whyman). In doing so, the Foundling mothers cast themselves and their children as particularly sympathetic and deserving of the Sisters’ help. Among the 17 letters included in this dissertation’s sample, 12 Foundling mothers use this strategy, making 19 individual references to the physical, moral, and emotional weakness of themselves and/or their children. The most pronounced example of this strategy can be seen in the letter written by the mother who cannot write anymore—so named because of the penultimate line of her letter “I cant write any more”—who begins her letter with a request: “Please take care of this baby as I can not do it myself I trust God will reward you I do not know if I live or die…I have sinned and can not expect good luck.” The mother who cannot write anymore—who over the course of her 103-word letter makes four references to her own weakness or frailty, the most of any Foundling mother in the 17-letter sample—composes a self who is physically and morally weak and who is repentant for that weakness. She situates her...
weakness in her physical state as a new mother, in her poverty, and in her own morality; although she does not specify that her sin was bearing an illegitimate child, this is heavily implied by her letter. The mother who cannot write anymore’s identification of her own frailty reads as deferent for two reasons: first, it articulates a weakness and, second, it implies that the Sisters of Charity do not share this weakness and are thus physically and morally superior. The mother who cannot write anymore may have legitimately been ill or on her deathbed, as it was not uncommon for 19th century mothers to fall ill during or after their confinement, but her characterization of herself frames her as physically and morally weak, which emphasizes how much her daughter Julia—perhaps soon to be an orphan—needs the Sisters’ help. Further, in referencing her sin and the fact that she “can not expect good luck,” the mother who cannot write anymore notes her regret for her actions and her willingness to shoulder the consequences, framing herself as deserving of the Sisters’ help. A similar appeal to physical weakness is made by the poor lame girl—named after her description of herself—whose 85-word letter contains a single but profound reference to her physical weakness: “Would you be kind anove as for to take good care of this baby as i am a poor lame girl and not able to take care of it.” Focusing on her physical handicap, and specifying it as the reason she is unable to care for her son Charles, emphasizes her
physical weakness, again making herself and Charles appear vulnerable.

While the Foundling mothers appeal to their physical and moral weakness, they also characterize themselves as emotionally weak. Expressions of heartbreak, illustrating emotional fatigue, are used in three Foundling Letters. The mother of John Larkin—named the hart broken mother—for example, ends her letter with the lines “I am his hart broken mother but I hope I can have him some time if not hear in heavin I hope.” The expression of her heartbreak and the mention of her potential death work together to create a subject who is both emotionally and physically weak, someone who, by extension, both needs and is worthy of the Sisters’ help. Further, the hart broken mother, in expressing her heartbreak, notes that she is not heartless and has the maternal feeling that a mother should, indicating that she is deserving of help.

While several Foundling mothers cast themselves as weak or fragile, others do the same with their children. Five of the 17 Foundling mothers use this strategy, making seven total references to their children’s physical weakness. For example, the letter left with Harry Oliver and written by the last request mother reads in its entirety “Please call him Harry Oliver – it being the last request of his mother He is now intrusted with all his worldly possessions to your tender care.” The idea that Harry is “intrusted”—which implies that he cannot care for himself—and that he arrives with “all his worldly possessions” creates a kind of vulnerability as he is

63 “Hart broken mother” or some near synonym is a phrase that recurs throughout the Foundling Letters in the 1000-letter corpus, as 15 letters use this phrase.
placed entirely in the hands of the Foundling Asylum with no hope of further aid from his mother. The anonymous mother, who did not sign her letter, does the same with her son Joseph, opening her letter with the lines “Please accept this little outcast son of mine.” The description of Joseph as outcast renders him vulnerable in two ways: first, as a foundling he exists on the fringes of society because of his potential illegitimacy and, second, Joseph has been literally cast out by his mother, implying that he is alone. Thus, in the letters of both the last request mother and the anonymous mother, the infants are framed as weak and vulnerable, as in desperate need of the Sisters’ care.

As much as the Foundling mothers characterize their children as vulnerable in order to gain the sympathy and the assistance of the Sisters and their Foundling Asylum, there are two letters in which mothers work to minimize the illness or potential physical weakness of their sons. The letter left with an unnamed son and signed by “His Mother” reads in its entirety “Please wash his eyes out with a soft cloth and a little warm water and if you do they will soon be well.” While His Mother asserts her maternity by specifying the kind of care her son should receive and by claiming a maternal identity through her signature (strategies that will be discussed later in this chapter), she also takes pains to illustrate that the baby’s eye problems are not serious; she argues, in other words, that her son is not as physically vulnerable as he seems. The General Grant mother—so named because she encloses a “General Grant our next President”
badge with her letter—does the same with her son Willie: “do not be afraid of the sores on it face it is nothing but a ringworm.” Specifying that Willie has nothing but a common, though highly contagious, fungal infection asserts that he may not be as ill as he appears, as ringworm on the face can look rather alarming. One reason His Mother and the General Grant mother specify that their sons had minor illnesses may have been the belief that a serious illness would lessen the boys’ chances of being admitted to the Foundling Asylum. Although the Foundling Asylum, according to its biennial reports, accepted many ill children, other foundling institutions in the city, such as the Protestant Infants Asylum, would not (Connelly; Quiroga). So, His Mother and the General Grant mother may have attempted to minimize their infants’ illnesses in order to increase their chances of being admitted into the Asylum. In sum, by characterizing themselves or their children as weak and/or vulnerable, a strategy used by 12 of the 17 letters in this sample, the Foundling mothers illustrate that they need and deserve the Sisters’ help.

Strategy #2: Characterizing Themselves and Their Children as Victims of Circumstances Beyond their Control. In addition to emphasizing their weakness and vulnerability, the Foundling mothers also characterize themselves and their children as victims of circumstances beyond their control, the second rhetorical strategy the Foundling mothers use primarily to defer. In characterizing themselves as victims of circumstances or as women in situations they cannot escape, the Foundling mothers defer by implying that the Sisters are not victims and have the means to change those circumstances. Such is the primary rhetorical strategy of three Foundling mothers, including Theresa Perazzo, who surrendered an unnamed infant to the Foundling Asylum on December 3, 1874. Theresa begins her letter by explaining “I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am at present with no means and without any relatives to nurse my Baby.” Theresa characterizes herself as a deceived woman with no
relatives to help her, casting herself as the victim as she had faith in the promises of her seducer and did not plan to end up pregnant and alone; now, she does not have the means to remedy that situation, but the Sisters do. In addition, Theresa’s story invokes the narrative of the fallen woman, or at least the beginning of that narrative in which the formerly virtuous girl is seduced and abandoned by a libertine (Sisters of Charity; Miller; Brumberg; “City Crime Again”). By emphasizing that, if the Foundling Asylum could care for her baby “until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself,” Theresa presents the Sisters with the very situation they wanted to cultivate: a mother who is able to avoid the fallen woman’s downward spiral into prostitution, infanticide, and suicide. Implied by Theresa’s invocation of the fallen woman narrative, even though her story is probably true, is that this downward spiral cannot be avoided without the Sisters’ help. This strategy, deferring by characterizing herself and her child as victims of circumstances beyond her control, is also used by the poor lame girl who writes that the father of her son Charles has “gone away what I don’t no where.” She is presumably not responsible for Charles’ father having run away, leaving her without financial support; thus, she is a victim of circumstance who now needs the Sisters’ help. Appealing to the narrative of the fallen woman enhances this victim-based deference, as the fallen woman, within her narrative, is herself a weak, helpless victim, inferior to the libertine who seducers and abandons her. Thus, the

Figure 3.6 Poor lame girl’s letter, New York Historical Society.
Foundling mothers are able to use a cultural narrative familiar to the Sisters of Charity to enhance their vulnerability and to defer by taking on, at least partially, the stance of the inferior fallen woman. The Foundling mothers’ characterization of the themselves as victims reads as deferent by implying that the Sisters have the power to influence or change the mothers’ circumstances, a power that the mothers lack.

**Strategy #3: Expressing the Inability to Financially Support the Child.** The final rhetorical strategy that the Foundling mothers use solely for deference is another variation on weakness or victimhood. Of the 17 letters included in this dissertation’s sample, eight contain the phrases “I have no way to provide for it,” “I…am not able to take care of it,” or some very near synonym. Such sentiments read as deferent strategies for two reasons: first, they directly state that the mother is unable to care financially for her child, indicating a perceived inability to fulfill her duty as a mother, and, second, they imply that the Sisters are able to afford care, marking the Sisters as superior. This sentiment is the only line written in the voice of Mary Sturges in her letter. Mary’s letter is written primarily in formal, legal-sounding language—“This is to certify that the undersign has give by her own free will and accord the full change now and forever her boy Harry Sturges to the Foundling Asylum”—but following this language Mary adds a line at the end of the letter in her own voice: “as I have know way to provide for it.” The implication is that Mary is giving up Harry because she cannot provide for him financially and because she understands that the Sisters can. The poor lame girl

![Figure 3.7 Mary Sturges’ letter, New York Historical Society.](image)
opens her letter with a similar sentiment, writing “Would you be kind above as for to take good care of this baby as I am a poor lame girl and not able to take care of it.” The poor lame girl here states that she cannot care for the child because of a physical handicap that potentially limits her ability to work, a perceived weakness that the Sisters do not share. Other Foundling mothers are not specific about why they cannot provide for their children. The mother who specified time of birth—so named because she is the only Foundling mother to specify both the date and time of her daughter Emma Jane’s birth—for example, opens her letter by stating “please take good care of this child as it is the only wish of its mother has she is not able to take care of it.” While the specific cause of her inability is unstated, the implication persists that the Sisters do not share it and will be able to care for Emma Jane. The sentiment that the mothers are unable to provide for their children and the similarity in prose across letters reinforces both the perceived weakness of the Foundling mothers and the role that poverty played in their decisions to surrender their children. Overall, the three strategies that are used only to defer—characterizing themselves and/or their children as physically, morally, or emotionally weak or vulnerable; casting themselves and/or their children as victims of circumstances beyond their control; and expressing the sentiment that they “have no way to provide for” their children—all invoke inferiority by implying that the Sisters do not share these weaknesses.

3.3.2 Rhetorical Strategies that the Foundling Mothers Use Only to Assert

The strategies used only for deference were based in the perceived weaknesses of the mothers and their children; in contrast, the rhetorical strategies used only for assertion refute that inferiority and/or characterize the mothers as in some way equal to the Sisters. There are four rhetorical strategies that the Foundling mothers use solely to assert: 1) the use of adjectives to set
expectations for the quality of care their infants will receive, 2) explicit invocations of the
authority of motherhood, 3) promises of continued financial support for their children, and 4) 
enclosure of tokens that create a tangible tie between mother and child. Through each of these
strategies, the Foundling mothers assert their maternity by exercising their authority as mothers,
an authority that the Sisters can never share. Implied by these four rhetorical strategies of
assertion is that the authority of motherhood is equal to the social and religious authority of the
Sisters of Charity.

*Strategy #1: Using Adjectives to Assert Expectations about the Quality of Their
Children’s Care.* The Foundling mothers, in securing care for their children, assert their
maternity and compose roles for themselves as mothers by specifying the quality of care their
infants should receive. They do so by using a range of adjectives—good, kind, tender, best, and
dear—to describe either the Sisters themselves or the quality of their care. These adjectives
assert an expectation of care or a persona for the Sisters that the Foundling mothers hope the
Sisters will fulfill; this expectation is grounded in

![Image of a handwritten note.](image)

Figure 3.8 The last request mother’s letter, New York Historical Society.

the Foundling mothers’ authority as mothers. Nine
of the 17 letters employ this strategy, with 14 uses of
adjectives; six of these uses describe the quality of
care the children should receive, while eight uses
describe the Sisters themselves. The last request
mother, for example, writes that her son Harry “is
now intrusted with all his worldly possessions to
your tender care.” The use of the adjective ‘tender’
to describe the care that Harry will receive functions
as a muted assertion in which the Sisters are presented with the quality of care that the mother is asking for Harry to receive. In describing the Sisters’ care as “tender,” the last request mother asks that the Sisters not merely ensure that Harry survives but that they actually treat him with the same tenderness that his mother would. In this assertion, the last request mother composes a role for herself as Harry’s mother by using her maternal authority to control the quality of care he will receive. The adjective “good” is frequently used in the same manner; of the 14 uses of adjectives, four are uses of “good,” tying it with “kind” as the most used adjective. For example, the mother who specified time of birth begins her letter with the request that the Sisters “please take good care of this child.” Again, the use of the adjective “good” asserts expectations for the quality of care that Emma Jane will receive. This assertion of maternity is slightly couched by the use of the deferent request marker “please” and by the phrasing as a question, but the mother who specified time of birth still invokes her authority as Emma Jane’s mother.

In addition to being used to describe the quality of care an infant should receive, adjectives are also used to describe the Sisters themselves, again setting an expectation of behavior the Foundling mothers hope will be fulfilled. For example, the anonymous mother addresses her letter to “My dear good sister” and the beseeching mother “Beseeches” the “kind sister” to care for her daughter Mary Dwyre. In each case, the descriptors “good” and “kind” assert an expectation of behavior and remind the Sisters of their duty. After all, Victorian institutions were not renowned for their kind treatment of the poor; for example, a scant three years earlier, before the opening of the foundling homes, babies like Mary Dwyre were left to languish in almshouses. The beseeching mother’s assertion, though, is effectively couched or veiled in praise of the Sisters and their care; in other words, the description of the Sisters as “kind” or “good” reads as both a compliment and a reminder of their duty to be “kind” and
“good” to the children. The use of adjectives to assert an expectation of care or behavior is often qualified by being used in tandem with more deferent strategies or couched in the form of a question, but it remains a frequently used rhetorical strategy of assertion based on the Foundling mothers’ authority as mothers.

Strategy #2: Explicitly Invoking the Authority of Motherhood. The use of adjectives to set expectations of behavior reads as assertive because unstated behind that expectation is the idea that the Foundling mothers’ maternal authority is equal to the Sisters’ religious and/or moral authority. Two Foundling mothers make direct, explicit references to their maternal authority and its power by using the phrase “it is the only wish of its mother” or a near synonym. Such expressions assert maternity by directly stating that the mothers’ wishes hold power and should be honored. For example, the letter written by the last request mother and left with her son Harry begins “Please call him Harry Oliver—it being the last request of his mother.” The phrase “last request”—in addition to evoking the possibility of the mother’s death—uses the idea of motherhood as a reason why the last request mother’s request should be honored. The mother who specified time of birth similarly appeals to the authority of motherhood, beginning her letter with the line “please take good care of this child as it is the only wish of its mother.” Again, she relies on the idea that the wishes of a mother hold authority and should be honored. Each of the four strategies that the Foundling mothers use solely to assert—the use of adjectives to set expectations about the quality of care their children will receive, promises of continued financial support, enclosure of tokens, and invocations of the authority of motherhood—allow them to assert themselves as respectable mothers.
Strategy #3: Promises of Continued Financial Support. Another frequently used strategy is the assertion that the Foundling mothers will fulfill their duties as parents by continuing to participate in their children’s financial care, which asserts both their maternity and respectability. Part of being a parent is providing financially for a child, and seven Foundling mothers within the 17-letter sample—as well as 61 more in the remaining 220 mothers’ letters and notes in the 1000-letter corpus—directly state that they are enclosing money and/or that they will continue to send money or clothing for their children. In doing so, the mothers articulate their intention to fulfill their obligations as parents and to forge a continued role, however small, in their children’s care and lives. For example, the nameless mother—so named because she does not sign the letter left with her daughter Cathrine—promises that “I will come and pay as much as I can every month.” The heart broken mother likewise pledges that “I will do all I can towards the support.” The anonymous mother, in securing care for her son Joseph, writes that “I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earning, and to bring it cloths as often as my means will allow.” She continues, “This is no idle promise good sister. I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty.” Here, the anonymous mother uses her promises of continued financial care to assert both her maternity and respectability.

Figure 3.9 The nameless mother’s letter, New York Historical Society.
respectability by differentiating between herself and the less respectable mothers who do not keep their promises. By continuing to financially support their children, the Foundling mothers are acting as mothers and compose a reality in which they continue to do so after surrendering their children. Further, they are acting as respectable mothers; the Foundling mothers are, in other words, asserting that they are not like the cruel, heartless women who abandon their children in the streets and who were condemned weekly in the press.

*Strategy #4: Enclosing Tokens in Order to Create a Tangible Tie Between Mother and Child.* Just as they assert their maternity through promises of continued financial care, the Foundling mothers also assert their maternity by enclosing tokens that create an additional tangible tie between mother and child. These tokens—usually jewelry, buttons, or strips of fabric—were designed to make the child easier to identify when the mother returned to claim him or her or when the mother came to the Foundling Asylum’s visiting days in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her child; however, the tokens also created a physical tie between mother and child as the infant carried with him or her an item that was of significance to his or her mother\(^64\). Two of the Foundling Letters in this dissertation’s sample contain tokens. A momma leaves a locket with her son Willie C, asserting in her letter, “Please do not have the chain & Locket off and let the child have it all the time, S so as to be identified; as no mistake must be made as to which child is the one wanted.” The locket here served to readily identify Willie, allowing a momma to retain her tie to and (hopefully) reclaim Willie C. The other token was coincidently also left with a boy named Willie. The General Grant mother attached a “General Grant our next President” badge to the bottom of her letter along with an assertion to the Sisters:

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\(^64\) The enclosure of tokens is not isolated to the Foundling Asylum. The London Foundling, for example, created a large exhibit, *Threads of Feeling*, based on tokens enclosed in its 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century letters that toured internationally and was the basis for a book of the same name.
“you will remember this bage.” The General Grant mother is more cryptic about the intended purpose and significance of her token, but she still leaves something important to her as a tie to her son. The enclosure of tokens, in other words, asserts maternity by leaving a physical artifact with the child that is in some way important to the mother, establishing a tangible tie between mother and child.

3.3.3 Rhetorical Strategies that the Foundling Mothers Use to Both Defer and Assert

The seven strategies outlined in the previous two sections are used solely for deference or solely for assertion; however, most of the rhetorical strategies used by the Foundling mothers are used for both deference and assertion depending upon the Foundling mothers’ individual rhetorical goals. There are eight strategies that the Foundling mothers use for both deference or assertion or use to defer and assert simultaneously: 1) the use of the letter’s greeting to establish a relationship with the Sisters; 2) the use of space in the greeting and conclusion of the letter to emphasize deferent or assertive elements; 3) the use of the signature line to assert and to distance themselves from maternity and/or respectability; 4) the use of first-person pronouns and third-person pronouns to both identify themselves with and linguistically distance themselves from maternity; 5) the use of personal and/or impersonal pronouns in referring to their children in order to minimize or create distance between mother and child; 6) the use of deferent and assertive request markers, or words that indicate that a request is taking place; 7) the invocation

Figure 3.10 The General Grant mother’s letter, New York Historical Society.
of God’s name to simultaneously assert the Sisters’ duty toward their children and thank the Sisters for that duty; and 8) couching or disguising assertions behind deferent appeals.

**Strategy #1: Using the Greeting to Establish a Relationship with the Sisters.** The first three strategies that the Foundling mothers use for both deference and assertion are tied to the generic features of a letter: the greeting, the signature line, and the use of space in the opening and closing lines of the letter. Of the 17 Foundling Letters studied here, 12 make rhetorical use of these elements; the remaining five do not contain a greeting or signature.

Table 3.2 Breakdown of Foundling Letters that use generic features rhetorically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters with a greeting and/or a signature that use space rhetorically</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters with both a greeting and a signature</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters with a signature but no greeting</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters with a greeting but no signature</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters without a signature or a greeting</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The letter’s greeting, as the first element in the letter, is ideal for establishing a relationship with the Sisters of Charity that sets the tone for the relative assertiveness or deference of the letter; this strategy is used by seven of the nine letters that contain a greeting; the greetings of the remaining two letters do not explicitly establish a relationship with the Sisters. The poor lame girl, whose February 5, 1872 letter opens this chapter, addresses her letter to “My Dear Friends.” The combination of the possessive pronoun, the adjective “Dear,” and the designation “Friends” constitutes an appeal to equality. The possessive pronoun implies that the Sisters, or at least an intimacy with them, belongs to the poor lame girl, while both “Dear” and “Friend” continue this intimacy. It is not common, after all, to refer to a superior, particularly a social superior one does not know, as “Dear” or as “Friend.” The anonymous mother, who did not sign her letter, uses a similar greeting, addressing her letter to “My dear good Sister.”
possessive pronoun and the adjectives “dear” and “good” function similarly here, evoking both an equality and an intimacy that continues throughout the letter, as the anonymous mother’s primary rhetorical strategy is to create a partnership with the Sisters in which they care for Joseph together; however, the anonymous mother does not assert that equality and intimacy as strongly as does the poor lame girl, electing to use term “Sister” rather than “Friends.”

These rather assertive greetings stand in contrast to the deferent greeting seen in the letter written by the beseeching mother. Her letter, dated March 4, 1870, is not addressed to the Sisters, but instead begins with the greeting “Your Humble Servant,” which focuses on the beseeching mother’s position rather than that of the Sisters. In other words, she belongs to the Sisters rather than the other way around. The use of the adjective humble may denote inferiority in a number of ways. People tend to describe themselves as humble when they are of a lower or working-class social status, when they are atoning for something they have done wrong, or when they are receiving help or assistance for which they may not feel deserving. The designation “Servant” further implies an inferior status. In other words, the beseeching mother uses her letter’s greeting to create a relationship with the Sisters that is based on inferiority rather than on equality as seen in the letters of the poor lame girl or the anonymous mother. The letters’ greetings thus establish a relationship with the Sisters in which the Foundling mothers either defer or assert, depending upon their individual rhetorical strategies and the overall relative deference or assertion of their letters.

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65 This phrase is also a common trope of the period that is frequently used to establish deference, or at least the appearance of it. In addition to its use in mothers’ letters and notes, the phrase is also used in letters of recommendation and introduction written by priests asking that the Sisters find a place in the Asylum for young women in the priests’ parishes.
Strategy #2: Using Space After the Greeting or Signature of the Letter to Emphasize Deferent or Assertive Elements. The space between the greeting and the opening line of the letter—or between the closing of the letter and the signature—is also used by the Foundling mothers to emphasize deferent or assertive elements, the second rhetorical strategy associated with the generic elements of a letter. James Daybell, in his study of Early Modern female letter writers, notes that the amount of space left before and after a greeting was used to denote deference; the extra space emphasized the deferent greeting of the letter, allowing the author’s praise of his or her addressee to take up its own, uncluttered space (11). Six of the Foundling mothers use a similar strategy; of these six, two only emphasize the opening of the letter, two only emphasize the closing, and two emphasize both the opening and the closing. An illustrative example of such a use of space can be found in the letter written by the mother who cannot write anymore. In the letter, pictured at right, the greeting “Dear Sisters of Mercy” takes up its own line, and the next line is indented to emphasize the deferent request marker “Please”—the word that marks the beginning of her request. The result is that each of the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used by the mother who cannot write anymore—using the greeting to establish an inferior relationship with the Sisters, using the adjective “Dear” to both

![Figure 3.11 Letter written by the mother who cannot write anymore, New York Historical Society.](image)
simultaneously praise the Sisters and set an expectation for their behavior toward the child, and using a deferent request marker (a strategy that will be discussed later in this section)—are emphasized. The mother who cannot write anymore uses extra space to reinforce strategies that simultaneously defer and assert—although, taken together, the three strategies appear more deferent than assertive—a use of space that is similarly used by the mother who specified time of birth. The mother who specified time of birth indents the first line of her letter to the extent that the deferent request marker “please” is the only word on the line, giving it considerable emphasis, as seen in her letter pictured to the right. This use of extra space to emphasize deferent or assertive elements allows the Foundling mothers to build upon the deference and/or assertion of their greeting.

Four Foundling mothers use a similar strategy to emphasize deferent or assertive elements of their signatures or of the final lines of their letters. For example, the poor lame girl indents the final line of her letter considerably—even further than the opening line of her letter—which emphasizes the conclusion: “Please take care of this baby and God bless you.” This use of space reinforces the importance and assertiveness of both the poor lame girl’s request that her son Charles be taken care of and her invocation of the Sisters’ religious duty to do so. Theresa Perezzo similarly emphasizes her deferent signature, which reads “I remain humble servant.” As discussed in reference to the beseeching mothers’ letter, the phrase “humble servant” indicates inferiority to the Sisters, an inferiority that Theresa emphasizes by indenting her signature and
focusing the reader’s attention on the deferent phrase. In sum, nine of the Foundling mothers use space in the greeting or signature of their letters in order to emphasize the relative deference and assertion of elements at the beginning and ending of their letters.

*Strategy #3: Using the Signature to Assert Motherhood and/or to Create Linguistic Distance from It.* The Foundling mothers use the signatures of their letters to both defer and assert by either asserting their maternity or establishing their deference through inferiority. Seven Foundling mothers use their letters’ signature line in such a fashion. For example, the mother of Willie C signs her letter “a momma.” Harry S. Babcock’s mother signs her letter “Its Mother.” The mother of an unnamed son signed her letter “His Mother.” In each case, these signatures assert the women’s identities as mothers. In some cases, this assertion is slightly qualified, as, for example, a momma indicates that she is a mother but not Willie’s mother. Although the context of her letter indicates that she is Willie’s mother, the indefinite article does not linguistically specify this.

One Foundling mother includes a signature as a way to assert her respectability. The mother of Walter Cooper signs her letter “Mrs. Cooper” reinforcing the fact that she was married and that Walter is legitimate, a point that she emphasizes in the body of her letter. Further, her salutation reads “Yours Respectfully,” reinforcing the respectability she asserts throughout her letter. The inclusion of a signature is thus used to assert maternity and respectability, even when that assertion is slightly qualified.

Figure 3.13 Minnie Smith’s letter, New York Historical Society.
Four Foundling mothers sign their actual names to their letters (10 Foundling Letters are unsigned). In two cases, those of Mary Sturges and Minnie Smith, their letters function almost like custody letters, assigning custody of their children to the Foundling Asylum. Minnie Smith’s letter, for example, reads in its entirety “I will give my child to you that i never will have back again.” Mary Sturges’ letter, signed with her marked X at the bottom as it appears that she could not write, reads “This is to certify that the undersign has give by her own free will and accord the full charge now and forever her boy Harry Sturges to the Foundling Asylum.” In each case, the letters, which serve both legal and rhetorical functions, require a name. The final instance of signing with a name, excepting Mrs. Cooper whose signature I have already discussed, is less clear cut. Theresa Perazzo, who signs her letter with both a name and date, is among the more direct Foundling mothers. Her letter reads in full

Sister Superioress
I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am at present with no means and without any relatives to nurse my baby Therefore I beg you for god sake to take my child; until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray god for you

I remain humble servant
Theresa Perazzo
New York Dec 3rd 1874

Theresa defers by casting herself as a vulnerable victim of circumstances beyond her control and by begging that her infant be admitted to the Foundling Asylum, but she also is confident enough to assume that her prayers will be of value to the Sisters and to sign her own name when so many other Foundling mothers leave their letters unsigned. Theresa’s signature, then, may imply that she is confident that her deception is not her fault, as she is not afraid to identify herself as a deceived woman. It may also imply that she wishes to claim her motherhood and infant by signing her legal name. In either instance, Theresa uses the signature line to assert herself as a
mother and a respectable woman. In sum, the Foundling mothers use their signature lines to assert themselves as mothers and as respectable women, but also to distance themselves from those roles.

**Strategy #4: Using First and Third Person Pronouns to Identify with and Create Linguistic Distance from Motherhood.** The simultaneous identification with and linguistic distance from motherhood and respectability is a frequent strategy of the Foundling mothers in this dissertation’s 17-letter sample, one that is often expressed in the sophisticated, complex combination of first-person, third-person, and impersonal pronouns that the Foundling mothers use to refer to themselves and their children. The Foundling mothers often use possessive pronouns to assert their motherhood or linguistically claim their infants. For example, Minnie Smith refers to her son James as “my child” in her letter, which reads in its entirety “Sister I will give my child to you that i never will have back again.” Similarly, the nameless mother begins her letter with the line “Sister you will pleas tack care of my Baby.” By using possessive pronouns to claim their children, Minnie Smith and the nameless mother identify themselves as mothers; interestingly, only four of the 17 Foundling mothers use possessive pronouns to refer to their children.

Seven Foundling mothers employ the inverse of this strategy, referring to themselves in third person when discussing their motherhood in order to linguistically distance themselves from their roles as mothers. For example, the last request mother refers to herself as “his mother,” as does the hart broken mother. Referring to themselves in the third person creates a linguistic distance between the mother and her maternity. The context of both letters makes clear
that “his mother” are Harry’s and John’s mothers, but each mother stops short of referring to herself as “I”. Neither the last request mother nor the hart broken mother, in other words, writes ‘I might claim him someday’ but “his mother might claim him someday” using the third-person pronoun to create a linguistic distance between the “I” in the letters and “his mother” who cannot care for her child. Ten Foundling mothers further distance themselves from motherhood by referring to their infants as “it” and depersonalizing the child. For example, Its Mother refers to her child as “it” in naming herself in the signature line of her letter, and the mother who specified time of birth writes “please take good care of this child as it is the only wish of its mother.” In both cases, it is clear who mother and child are, but the inclusion of the pronoun ‘it’ and the use of third person create a kind of linguistic distance not only between mother and motherhood but between mother and child as well.

Six Foundling mothers mix pronouns, sometimes referring to themselves with first-person pronouns and sometimes with third-person. The clearest example of this is seen in Mrs. Cooper’s letter. When asserting her respectability, she refers to herself with first-person pronouns: “I married respectfully and did not think my husband was a bad man;” however, when she talks about her inability to keep her son Walter, she uses third person: “I wish you would keep him for 3 or 4 month and if he is not claimed by that time you may be sure it mother cannot support it I may some day send some money.” Here, Mrs. Cooper uses first person to assert her
motherhood when she talks about the things that she is doing to fulfill her duty as a parent, but when she talks about ways in which she feels she may not have fulfilled that duty, she uses third-person pronouns to distance herself.

Strategy #5: Using Personal and/or Impersonal Pronouns to Minimize or Create Distance Between Mother and Child. As illustrated by Mrs. Cooper, while the Foundling mothers use a complex set of pronouns to refer to themselves, they do the same when referring to their children. Depending upon the context of the letter, infants are referred to as “the baby,” “he” or “she,” or “it.” Seven Foundling mothers refer to their infants exclusively as “this baby” and/or “it,” implying a kind of distance between mother and child by depersonalizing the infant. Four Foundling mothers refer to their sons exclusively as “he” and/or “my baby” throughout their letters, asserting their roles as mothers and personalizing their children. The remaining six Founding mothers mix pronouns, shifting between “he” or “she” and “it” in referring to their infants. Again, Mrs. Cooper provides the most illustrative example of this shifting: “I wish you would keep him for 3 or 4 month and if he is not claimed by that time you may sure it mother cannot support it I may some day send some money to him do not forget his name.” Here, Walter is a “he” when Mrs. Cooper discusses the ways in which she functions as his mother, but Walter becomes “it” when she discusses the ways in which she does not. In other words, Mrs. Cooper’s pronoun use depersonalizes her son when discussing the ways in which she may have failed him, but then re-personalizes him when discussing the ways she acts as good mother.

Analyzing the pronouns Foundling mothers use in referring to their infants is somewhat complicated by the grammatical norms of the 19th century. Although ‘it’ is, in the 21st century, considered too impersonal for a baby, this was not always the case; thus, some of the Foundling mothers’ pronoun use may be attributable to the grammar of the period. That said, Mrs. Cooper’s
shifting between pronouns—particularly the ways in which her use of “it” to refer to her son is often coupled with the use of third person in referring to herself—also illustrates that there is a rhetorical component to the pronoun use.

Strategy #6: Using Deferent and/or Assertive Request Markers. The Foundling mothers use a range of request markers that vary in their relative deference and/or assertion. Linguist Margaret J.M. Sonmez defines request markers as “those parts of requests that act as discourse markers” signaling that a request is taking place (18). The Foundling mothers use a range of request markers that vary in their relative deference and/or assertion; 14 of the 17 Foundling mothers use some kind of request marker. The beseeching mother, for example, begins her letter with the request marker “beseeches,” which reads particularly deferent as it denotes a kind of begging. Other Foundling mothers, such the nameless mother, the anonymous mother, and his mother, use the more moderate request marker “please” which still marks a polite, deferent request but is more assertive than “beseeches.” Still others are quite assertive in their use of request markers. For example, Minnie Smith writes “I will give my child to you,” using the assertive request marker “I will” to advise the Sisters of her actions. Minnie’s phrasing implies that her advising is also a request, but grammatically it is not phrased as a request or question. Some mothers eschew request markers altogether, phrasing their requests as commands. For example, the General Grant mother begins her letter “This tow dollars is to have this child christan Willie.” There are no request markers here as the General Grant mother is quite assertive about how the two dollars should be spent and how Willie should be christened. In other words, request markers can be used to defer or to assert depending upon the overall deference or assertiveness of the letters.
Strategy #7: Invoking God’s Name to Assert the Sisters’ Duty Toward the Children. The Foundling mothers also simultaneously defer and assert in their inclusion of a sentiment found in five of the 17 Foundling Letters analyzed in this dissertation: “May god reward you,” “I trust God will reward you,” or a near synonym. These references function as a simultaneously deferent and assertive strategy, thanking the Sisters for their care and reminding the Sisters of their religious duty to offer it. For example, the mother who specified time of birth requests that the Sisters “take good care of this child… and god will Bless you.” In expressing this sentiment, she reminds the Sisters of their duty toward Emma Jane in God’s name, veiling her assertion behind a religious invocation. Simultaneously, the sentiment thanks the Sisters for that same good care, as ‘God Bless You’ is common way of expressing thanks for a kindness done. The mother who cannot write anymore uses a similar strategy, requesting that the Sisters “Please take care of this baby…I trust God will reward you.” This iteration of the sentiment functions in much the same way, veiling behind God’s name her invocation of the Sisters’ duty toward her daughter Julia and simultaneously thanking the Sisters for their potential fulfillment of that duty. This strategy is used more assertively by Theresa Perazzo, as she concludes her December 3, 1874 letter by writing “I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray god for you.” Theresa’s reference to God still invokes the Sisters’ religious responsibility toward her unnamed child, but also implies that Theresa’s prayers would be valuable to the Sisters. In other words, she makes herself the agent in the Sisters’ reward or blessing rather than God. In sum, expression of the sentiment “May God reward you,” “May God bless you,” or some near synonym allows the Foundling mothers to remind the Sisters of their religious duty while couching that assertion in a deferent expression of gratitude.
Strategy #8: Couching. Couching, or disguising an assertive argument behind a deferent appeal, is the final rhetorical strategy that is used to simultaneously assert and defer. As the sentiment “may God reward you” illustrates, couching is often used in combination with other rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; thus, it functions as a sort of an umbrella strategy that the mothers use in individual ways within their specific letters. Sometimes, as seen in the sentiment “may God reward you” or in the use of adjectives to set expectations for a child’s care, couching functions as a single rhetorical strategy that defers and asserts simultaneously. Other times, couching is accomplished through the dynamic movement between multiple strategies of deference and assertion. For example, the mother who cannot write anymore ends her letter with two lines:

You call it as you think best I am not able to write any more
I call it Julia R Hudson

The first line reads as deferent, both 1) because the mother who cannot write anymore presents the Sisters with the opportunity to name the child—a privilege typically awarded to a parent—seemingly deferring to the Sisters’ better judgement and 2) because the sentiment that she is “not able to write any more”—a phrase used in sentimental novels and published letters—indicates physical and/or emotional weakness (Miller 28). However, the offer to name Julia does not read as genuine as, in the next line, the mother who cannot write anymore asserts Julia’s name directly, an assertion that functions as a request. In other words, that request is couched behind the appeals to physical and emotional weakness in the first line, which serve to soften the strength of the request and to allow the mother who cannot write anymore to assert herself as Julia’s mother while still using deference to beg that Julia be cared for. This use of deferent appeals to couch, veil, or soften the assertive strategies that come directly after is among the most commonly used strategies in the Foundling Letters—the 17 analyzed for this dissertation
and the remaining approximately 220 mothers’ letters and notes in the larger 1000-letter corpus. This dynamic movement from deferent strategies, to assertive, and back again will be the focus of chapters four and five, as I offer case studies that illustrate how the Foundling mothers compose maternal and respectable selves by moving dynamically between the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion identified in this chapter.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analyzed rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Rhetorical strategies of deference are those that appeal to a perceived inferiority on the part of the author (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay); in contrast, rhetorical strategies of assertion are those that refute that perceived inferiority and/or appeal to equality. In reviewing scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion—scholarship that includes analyses of women’s published essays and unpublished everyday writing of multiple genres—I focused on four concerns that expand the basic definition discussed above. First, I explained that the definition of deference used in this dissertation is extrapolated from multiple analyses of women’s academic and everyday writing. Although many scholars identify women’s letters and essays as deferent or as assertive (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Whyman; Wall; Vasquez), few explicitly defined these terms. Because 1) the appeals to a perceived inferiority and 2) the invocation of an unequal power relationship between author and addressee are common traits of texts identified as deferent, these strategies form the basis of this dissertation’s definitions of deference and assertion. Second, I discussed the role that gender plays in deference. Deference is often coded as a feminine strategy, both because of its prevalence in women’s professional and everyday writing and because the weakness and
victimhood often associated with deference are culturally identified as feminine characteristics. When men defer, they do so based on external social systems—such as class hierarchy or familial position—that do not indicate victimhood. Third, I identified the ways in which concerns other than gender—such as class, marital status, and religion—play in deference, as many women defer not just as women but as women of specific classes and within specific cultures. Finally, I analyzed assertion’s role in deference. Whereas most studies of deference in women’s writing configure assertion as the opposite of deference, this dissertation works to examine assertion as a complementary rhetorical strategy to deference.

The ways in which assertion complements and works in tandem with deference will be explored more fully in the case studies that make up chapters four and five. In those case studies, I analyze letters in full, focusing on the dynamic movement between deference and assertion. Before deference and assertion can be analyzed as complimentary strategies, however, they must be understood in isolation in order to demonstrate exactly how such strategies appeal to and/or refute inferiority. Thus, in this chapter, I identified and analyzed the individual rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used by the Foundling mothers included in this dissertation’s sample. Looking across those 17 Foundling Letters, I analyzed 15 rhetorical strategies of deference and/or assertion, each of which are used by at least two letters. Three strategies—1) appeals to the perceived physical, moral, and/or emotional weakness of mother and/or child, 2) characterization of the mother and/or child as victims of circumstances beyond the mother’s control, and 3) expression of the inability to financially support the child—were used solely for deference, appealing in some way to the perceived weakness and victimhood of the Foundling mothers and their children. Four rhetorical strategies were used only to defer, and these strategies refuted weakness and established equality by appealing to the authority of
motherhood, an authority that the Sisters could not share: 1) the use of adjectives to set expectations of the quality of care their infants will receive, 2) promises of continued financial support for their children, 3) enclosure of tokens that create a tangible tie between mother and child, and 4) direct invocations of the authority of motherhood. Finally, the Foundling mothers used eight strategies to both defer and assert, depending upon their individual rhetorical goals: 1) the use of the letter’s greeting to establish a relationship with the Sisters; 2) the use of space in the greeting and conclusion of the letter to emphasize deferent or assertive elements; 3) the use of the signature line to assert and distance themselves from maternity and/or respectability; 4) the use of first-person pronouns and third-person pronouns to both identify themselves with and linguistically distance themselves from maternity; 5) the use of personal and/or impersonal pronouns in referring to their children in order to minimize or create distance between mother and child; 6) the use of deferent and assertive request markers, or words that indicate that a request is taking place; 7) the invocation of God’s name to simultaneously assert the Sisters’ duty toward the children and thank the Sisters for that duty; and 8) couching or disguising assertion behind deferent appeals.

My analysis of the 15 strategies of deference and assertion used by at least two of the letters in the 17-letter sample was organized into three sections—strategies used only for deference, only for assertion, and for both deference and assertion—in order to illustrate how the strategies function separately; however, the organization also slightly obscured four relationships that are important to how I analyze the Foundling Letters: 1) the relationship between the letters in the sample and those in the 1000-letter corpus, 2) the relationship among the degrees of deference and assertion used in each Foundling Letter, 3) the relationship among
letters that express common sentiments and turns of phrase, and 4) the relationship between
deferece, assertion, and gender.

First, the full 1000-letter corpus, from which the 17 letters analyzed in this dissertation
are drawn, is a sample of convenience. One consequence of this is that the numerical accounts
that I present in this chapter of 1) how many letters in the sample use a rhetorical strategy and 2)
how many times that strategy is used across the sample do not precisely indicate how widely
each strategy is used in the remaining 220 mothers’ letter and notes in the 1000-letter corpus. I
included the numerical accounts in my analysis for the sake of the sake of clarity, but the
conclusions that can be drawn from those numbers are limited. This is not, however, a
dissertation of numbers; instead, I focus on how rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion
function within the Foundling Letters, and that functioning is consistent between this
dissertation’s sample and the full corpus. While the numbers indicated in this chapter do not
reflect the frequency of use in the mothers’ letters and notes not included in the 17-letter sample,
those numbers do 1) identify that a pattern exists in the type of strategies used and how they are
used and 2) point to the ways in which the full corpus provides important context for my
analysis.

Second, although I have organized the 15 strategies analyzed in this chapter as those used
only for deference, only for assertion, or for both deference and assertion, I do not mean to imply
that the strategies in each group are equally deferent or assertive. For example, 12 Foundling
mothers characterize themselves as physically weak, but some describe themselves as weaker or
more pitiful than others. Further, 14 Foundling mothers use adjectives to assert the quality of
care they hope their children will receive, but some of those adjectives are still couched in very
deferent terms. In other words, as the examples throughout this chapter have illustrated, while
the Foundling mothers may use similar strategies of deference and assertion, their use of those
strategies varies in the degree of their deference and assertion.

Third, the fact that so many of the Foundling mothers in this dissertation’s 17-letter
sample use not just similar strategies, but express many similar sentiments in nearly identical
phrasing would seem to indicate that the mothers were drawing from a common cultural
influence. While tracing such an influence is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is
important to note these similarities in prose in light of the tension between genuine emotion and
performance that exists in the use of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Foundling
mothers, in other words, may have used common cultural or rhetorical tropes of persuasive letter
writing or literary models to help them perform their identities as mothers of foundling children
(Miller; Daybell), but such influence does not also mean that their letters do not genuinely reflect
their desperation.

Fourth, although scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion argues
that appealing to weakness and victimhood is a “feminine” or female strategy (Daybell; Wall;
Whyman) very few of the Foundling mothers directly and explicitly appeal to gender as a
standard of deference, which is common in letters written by women to other women (Wall;
Whyman; Daybell). However, their status as mothers, the degree to which desertion and the
absence of men contributes to their poverty, and their need to advocate for their moral
respectability all imply that gender plays a role in their appeals to inferiority even if the
Foundling mothers don't explicitly state that role. For example, Theresa Perazzo begins her letter
with the lines “I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am

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66 For example, although the hart broken mother is the only woman to describe herself as such in the 17-letter
sample, 14 additional mothers in the 1000-corpus use the same phrase, referring to themselves as its, his, or the
hart broken mother. While this is a common phrase, the frequency of its use may also imply that the mothers are
drawing on a common cultural influence.
at present with no means and without any relatives to nurse my baby.” Theresa does not specify here that she is weak or vulnerable because she is a woman, but her gender and the absence of her child’s father certainly played a part in her circumstances. In other words, even though not all of the Foundling mothers appeal to established, clichéd tropes of feminine fragility, their gender is still implicated in the ways in which they characterize themselves as inferior.

In sum, the Foundling mothers use a range and combination of strategies to defer and to assert. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how those rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion function separately; in the next two chapters, I will analyze how the Foundling mothers dynamically balance those strategies, or how deference and assertion function as complementary strategies. Specifically, in chapter four I demonstrate how the Foundling mothers balance the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion outlined in this chapter to compose maternal selves and explain how this balance illustrates assertion’s role in deference. In chapter five, I present three additional case studies that explain how the Foundling mothers balance deference and assertion in order to argue for their own respectability and their worth as women.
CHAPTER FOUR

“I REMAIN HER TRUE MOTHER UNTIL DEATH”: COMPOSING A MATERNAL SELF

4.1 Introduction

On May 29, 1872, two-week-old Mary Ricky was surrendered to the Foundling Asylum along with a note:

Dear Sisters

I have left my baby with you today hoping with God's care and yours she will be well cared for. She was born on the 15th of May. Her name is Mary Ricky. She has been baptized dear Sisters I do not know your rules but I shall call to see you when I feel strong enough to go out. I will try and do all that I can for my little pet.

I remain her true mother until death.

The self-described “true mother” composes a role for herself as Mary’s mother by balancing many of the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion identified in chapter three. For example, the true mother uses possessive pronouns to linguistically claim Mary and assert her role as Mary’s mother, referring to Mary as “my baby” and “my little pet.” She uses the adjective “well”—“hoping with God’s care and yours she will be well cared for”—to assert the quality of care that she hopes Mary will receive, an assertion that is reinforced by 1) her invocation of God’s name, which reminds the Sisters of their religious duty to provide good care, and 2) her maternal authority. Further, the true mother asserts her motherhood through promises of continued financial care,
allowing her to compose a continued role in Mary’s life. Finally, she directly and unequivocally asserts her motherhood in the letter’s striking final line: “I remain her true mother until death.”

While the true mother uses each of these individual strategies, much of the letter’s rhetorical power is derived from the ways in which she balances these strategies of assertion with rhetorical strategies of deference. Like the true mother, the 17 Foundling mothers in this dissertation’s sample dynamically balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to compose a respectable, maternal self in the face of circumstances that would seem to deny their maternity: the surrendering of children they would likely never see again. In this chapter, I use case studies of three individual Foundling Letters—those of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma—to illustrate 1) how the three mothers balance deference and assertion and 2) how they use that balance to compose maternal selves.

The letters of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma—as well as the remaining 14 mothers’ letters and notes in this dissertation’s sample—illustrate a remarkable range of rhetorical strategies that include linguistic strategies, but also utilize layout, capitalization, and other visual strategies. In chapter three, I identified and analyzed many of these strategies, and, in three case studies, I examine how the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma combined these strategies into larger, unique argumentative strategies. These three letters were chosen for case studies because they exemplify the range of strategies used by the Foundling mothers and because the mothers make particularly strong arguments for their maternity. The beseeching mother, whose letter is analyzed first, couches her assertions with deference as she illustrates that she and her daughter Mary both need and deserve the Sisters’ help. The anonymous mother, in contrast, balances deference and assertion by

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67 While individual strategies used in these letters were discussed in chapter three, I analyze the letters in their entirety here.
composing a partnership in which she and the Sisters care for her son Joseph together. Finally, a momma balances deference and assertion by using passive voice to conceal herself and the Sisters in her letter, creating a power relationship in which she is able to assert her maternity.

While each of these three mothers presents different ways of balancing deference and assertion, they also illustrate variance in their relative degrees of deference and assertion. The beseeching mother, for example, is primarily deferent, as her major rhetorical strategy, couching, relies on downplaying assertion. In contrast, the anonymous mother is markedly more assertive, as is required in order to create an equal partnership with the Sisters. A momma, in composing a new power relationship with the Sisters, is still more assertive. Even with these differences, though, the case studies will illustrate that the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma share a set of common rhetorical goals: to secure care for their children and to argue for their worth as mothers.

### 4.2 The Beseeching Mother

The beseeching mother surrendered her infant daughter Mary Dwyre to the Foundling Asylum on March 4, 1870. In the letter that accompanied Mary, the beseeching mother’s primary rhetorical strategy is to couch her assertion of her maternity behind references to her own emotional and economic weakness. Couching, or disguising assertive appeals with deference in an attempt to soften assertions (Tebeaux and Lay), is a deferent rhetorical strategy with a long history in women’s letter writing. Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay, in their analysis of Renaissance women writers, describe couching as the appeal to a “distinct gender role such as advice on mothering…[or] [a] seeming…accept[ance] the ‘weaknesses’ of” women in order to appease a skeptical audience (53). In other words, understanding that their audiences
may have been skeptical or even hostile to arguments not considered suitable for women, Tebeaux and Lay’s Renaissance writers framed those arguments in gender roles and positionalities their audience would consider appropriate. The beseeching mother uses a modified version of this strategy in which, given the social, moral, and religious superiority of her audience—the Sisters of Charity who run the Foundling Asylum—she mitigates the assertion of her maternity by couching it behind references to her own weakness and that of her daughter. In other words, although her letter contains moments of assertion in which she frames herself as both maternal and respectable, these moments are couched between and within deferent appeals that illustrate how desperately she and Mary need the Sisters’ help.

The beseeching mother balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion by couching her assertive appeals in two ways. First, she couches her assertive appeals with deference, creating a three-move pattern in which she defers, asserts, and then defers again. Second, when she does assert, her assertive appeals can often be read as simultaneously assertive and deferent. In other words, there are two simultaneous rhetorical readings of the phrase or word used: one deferent and one assertive. The result of the beseeching mother’s couching is that the entire letter feels primarily deferent, as what little assertion exists is softened by the frequent, profound deference. The beseeching mother is not, however, always deferent to the same degree throughout her letter; she becomes less deferent as her argument progresses or as she moves from begging for Mary’s care to characterizing herself as a good mother. In other words, with each successive use of the couching pattern, the assertion becomes stronger and the deference couching it weaker.

The beseeching mother’s letter, dated March 4, 1870, is 61 words in length, including the date written at the top. While the letter contains some formal elements of the letter genre, such
as the date and greeting, it does not have a conventional introduction, body, and conclusion organization; instead, the letter is best described as having four rhetorical moves\textsuperscript{68}, each of which is approximately a sentence in length: 1) a request that her daughter Mary be cared for; 2) a short explanation of her and Mary’s circumstances that supports this request; 3) a promise of continued financial support for Mary; and 4) an assertion of Mary’s name. The overall effect is a highly deferent letter in which the beseeching mother begs that Mary receive the Sisters’ “kind” care and emphasizes her own selflessness as a mother. This emphasis serves to highlight the beseeching mother’s economic weakness and assert an identity as a good mother. The beseeching mother’s letter, pictured below, reads as follows:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{The beseeching mother’s letter, New York Historical Society.}
\end{figure}

\textit{New York March 4\textsuperscript{th}/70}
\textit{Your Humble Servant}
\textit{Beseeches you kind Sister to be kind to this Baby and may god Reward you it has a noble godfather and its Poor mother is behold-ing to work the last cent in my possession is one Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it The Infants name is Mary Dwyre}

The beseeching mother’s couching begins in the letter’s greeting and first line, which function together as a single sentence to beg that Mary be cared for in the Foundling Asylum and to establish the highly deferent tone of the letter:

\textsuperscript{68} These rhetorical moves are similar to those that James Daybell describes as integral to the Early Modern letter of petition: introduction, request, amplification (reasons request should be granted), “refutation of objections,” and conclusion (5); however, the letter does not 1) include all of these rhetorical moves or 2) include them in this order, both of which are central to letters of petition as described by Daybell. In other words, while the beseeching mother’s letter, and the letters of other Foundling mothers, use similar rhetorical moves, there is nothing to indicate that they follow such a strict pattern.
“Your Humble Servant Beseeches you kind sister to be kind to this Baby and may god Reward you.” The letter’s greeting “Your Humble Servant”—which is written on its own line and formatted like a greeting but also functions as the subject of the letter’s first sentence—establishes a relationship with the Sisters of Charity that is based on the beseeching mother’s inferiority. The pronoun “Your”—when coupled with “Humble Servant”—indicates that the beseeching mother, as well as her loyalty and servitude, belongs to the Sisters, placing them in a position of ownership or superiority. The adjective “Humble” denotes inferiority in several ways. People tend to describe themselves as humble when they are of a lower or working-class social status, when they are acknowledging and working to repent for a wrong doing, or when they are giving thanks for a kindness they may not feel they deserve. The beseeching mother, in using the word “Humble” invokes of all of these potential meanings. Finally, the noun “Servant” further indicates inferiority, implying that the beseeching mother in some way serves the Sisters. Taken together, the greeting “Your Humble Servant” establishes a relationship of moral and social inferiority. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the phrase “Your Humble Servant” was also a trope commonly used during the period to perform deference, even when the deference was not entirely genuine; however, the phrase’s history does not negate the deferent nature of the greeting, particularly when read in the context of the remainder of the sentence. The greeting’s deference is further emphasized by the beseeching mother’s use of space. As discussed in chapter three, the Foundling mothers often use excess space in their letters’ opening and closing lines to emphasize a particular word or phrase and, by extension, its relative deference or assertiveness. The beseeching mother, rather than formatting the sentence on a
single line as is conventional with grammatically correct sentences, places the greeting on its own line, which draws the reader’s eye and emphasizes the greeting’s deference\(^69\).

Having established a relationship with the Sisters based on her own inferiority, the beseeching mother reinforces the deference in the letter’s greeting by beginning the first line with the deferent request marker from which her name is drawn: “Beseeches.” A request marker is a word that denotes that a request is about to be made, such as ‘please’ or ‘implore’ (Sonmez). “Beseeches” is a highly deferent request marker that denotes a kind of begging (Sonmez) in contrast to more moderate request markers such as ‘please’. This begging is again further emphasized by the beseeching mother’s use of space. Even though “Beseeches” is technically the verb in the sentence, its indentation still draws attention to the act of begging\(^70\). The cumulative effect of these three strategies—using the greeting to establish a relationship based on inferiority, using a deferent request marker, and using space to emphasize both—is one of profound deference.

Having established this deference, the beseeching mother makes her first assertion, the second element in her pattern of couching assertion with deference. She “Beseeches” the “kind Sister to be kind to this baby.” As discussed in chapter three, the use of the adjective “kind” to describe both the Sisters and quality of care they will provide is a subtle assertion of maternal authority that articulates an expectation or standard of behavior. The beseeching mother, in other words, describes the Sisters and their care as kind in order to remind the Sisters of their

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\(^69\) While this use of space echoes the generic format of a letter, it also functions as a rhetorical strategy. There is enough deviation from the generic letter format in the beseeching mother’s letter, as well as others in the sample, to suggest that the beseeching mother may have been doing more than following conventional letter format. Further, regardless of the beseeching mother’s intent, the rhetorical effect of the layout remains.

\(^70\) It is possible, of course, that the word “Beseeches” is indented because it is a genre convention of the of the letter to indent the first line. Whatever the case, the effect of the indent remains that same: emphasis is placed on the deferent request marker “Beseeches.”
obligation to be kind. After all, the beseeching mother is not just asking that Mary be helped to survive, that she be clothed and fed, but rather that she be treated with the tenderness that a mother would provide, behavior that was not guaranteed in Victorian institutions. Even this subtle move toward assertion, however, is couched behind deference in two ways. First, the entire line—due to the greeting and use of request marker “Beseeches”—reads as much like a plea as it does a request, as the beseeching mother begs for kindness; the moments of deference before and after the use of the adjective ‘kind’ effectively disguise its assertion. Second, the request that the Sister be or behave kindly is hidden behind a complement in describing the Sisters themselves as kind. In other words, the beseeching mother requests kindness by acting as if the Sisters already are kind, composing a kind identity for the Sisters within the letter.

In the final phrase of the letter’s first sentence, the beseeching mother completes her couching pattern; having deferred in the greeting and request marker and having then asserted in her use of the adjective ‘kind,’ the beseeching mother returns again to deference. This final element of the pattern, however, is not quite as deferent as the greeting and request marker with which it began. After “Beseeching” the “kind sister to be kind to this Baby,” the beseeching mother concludes with “may God Reward you.” In one way, this phrase can be read as a slight assertion, as the beseeching mother invokes God’s name as way to remind the Sisters of their religious obligation to be kind to Mary. At the same time, “may God reward you” is a common way of giving thanks, which softens the assertion of the Sisters’ potential obligation. In sum, in the letter’s first sentence, the beseeching mother is overwhelmingly deferent, balancing rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion by creating a pattern in which her assertive appeal is couched between deferent appeals and by using phrases that are simultaneously deferent and assertive.
After a highly deferent first sentence in which the beseeching mother requests that her daughter Mary be cared for, the second sentence shifts her argument, explaining why she and Mary deserve and need the Sisters’ help; in making this argument, the beseeching mother still couches her assertions, but is less deferent than she had been in her greeting and opening line. In other words, while the beseeching mother is deferent in her initial begging request, she becomes more assertive as she presents her case for why that request should be granted. Her case begins with a curious phrase that marks a sudden departure from the first line: “it [Mary] has a noble godfather and its Poor mother is behold-ing to work.” Here the beseeching mother begins with the assertion that Mary has a noble godfather, moving from the couched assertion of “may god Reward you” at the end of the first line to the more clearly assertive reference to Mary’s godfather at the beginning of the second. In other words, the final deferent appeal of the previous pattern of couching functions as this first deferent appeal of this new pattern, creating throughout the letter a series of interlocking patterns—defer, assert, defer, assert, defer—in which each assertive moment in couched between two deferent ones. The opening assertive reference to Mary’s godfather can be read as framing Mary, and by extension the beseeching mother, as worthy of the Sisters’ help. Further, the statement can be read as a gesture toward the beseeching mother’s social and perhaps even moral equality with the Sisters. After all, if someone noble is associated with Mary and the beseeching mother—and is potentially willing to claim a status as important in the Catholic community as a godparent—then the beseeching mother cannot be completely without maternity and respectability; she and Mary, in other words, cannot be people unworthy of help.\footnote{Alternatively, the description of Mary’s godfather as “noble” may also be a veiled reference to Mary’s parentage, implying that Mary’s father was not working class. Other mothers’ letters and notes in the 1000-letter corpus reference the upper-class parentage of the infants, some using parentage to argue that the child deserves care and}
beseeching mother returns to deference, writing that “its Poor mother is behold-ing to work.” The beseeching mother defers here in two ways. First, her description of herself as “Poor” appeals to a perceived inferiority because the adjective casts her as both economically vulnerable and in need of sympathy. Second, the description of herself as “behold-ing” to work reinforces that economic vulnerability, arguing that she has no choice but to work instead of caring for Mary; the word “behold-ing” denotes a profound obligation. Even though these moments of deference highlight a perceived inferiority or vulnerability, they also characterize the beseeching mother as a caring, respectable mother who does not want to leave her child. The beseeching mother’s word choice differentiates her from the cold, unfeeling, neglectful mothers often described in newspaper accounts of women who abandon their children (“Alleged Attempted Infanticide”; “Murdered Her Infant”; “Supposed Infanticide”). In other words, the beseeching mother works to assert herself not just as a mother, but as a good mother. Thus, although the beseeching mother still couches her assertion in deference—both because she moves from deference, to assertion, and back to deference and because these moments of assertion are simultaneously deferent—she is less deferent here than in the opening line.

Having requested that her daughter be cared for and explaining why both she and Mary deserve that care, the beseeching mother becomes increasingly assertive in composing an identity as Mary’s mother. The beseeching mother still couches her assertion in deference, but the assertion strengthens and the deference weakens. The beseeching mother argues for her worth as a mother by asserting that, even though she is relinquishing custody of Mary, she is still acting as a good mother should. The beseeching mother writes, “the last cent in my possession is one Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it.” In this sentence, the beseeching mother

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others stating directly that the child’s upper-class surname or connection may be of use to the child or Foundling Asylum in the future.
makes two important rhetorical moves that balance deference and assertion and that characterize her as a good mother. First, she establishes the depth of her poverty by noting that how little money she has and how much she needs it, a deferent reference to her economic weakness that furthers her argument that she and Mary need the Sisters’ help. The phrase “last cent in my possession” implies that the beseeching mother is out of money, while the use of the word “cent” indicates that the money that she did have was not much, again highlighting her poverty and economic weakness. Second, the beseeching mother asserts her selflessness, respectability, and maternity by giving that last dollar to her daughter. This assertion constructs the beseeching mother as worthy of the Sisters’ help by noting that she is a good, respectable mother literally giving all that she has to her infant daughter. Again, the beseeching mother uses a pattern in which she is deferent in noting her poverty, but assertive in characterizing her actions as that of a good, selfless mother.

As we have seen in the first three sentences of the letter, the beseeching mother establishes a pattern in which she couches her assertions in deference; this pattern is broken in the final line when the beseeching mother unequivocally asserts her daughter’s name: “The infants name is Mary Dwyre.” The beseeching mother does not phrase her daughter’s name as a request, nor does she attempt to qualify her assertion with deference in any way. Instead, she asserts her daughter’s name as if it were a fact that is not in question. The beseeching mother’s use of space further emphasizes her assertion of Mary’s name. The phrase “The infants name” is indented, which emphasizes the phrase’s assertion and importance. More dramatically, the child’s name “Mary Dwyre” takes up its own line, standing as an assertive statement of fact. This final assertion establishes the beseeching mother as Mary’s mother; a parent, after all, traditionally names a child.
The dynamic balance between deference and assertion through couching employed by the beseeching mother serves her primary rhetorical purposes: the beseeching mother works to secure care for Mary by arguing that she and Mary desperately need and deserve such help and to compose a self in which she is a good, respectable mother. The beseeching mother composes this maternal identity in three ways. First, in the opening lines of the letter, she uses the adjective “kind” to set expectations for the quality of care that Mary will receive and for the behavior the Sisters will exhibit toward her daughter. As a mother, she is concerned about and works to influence the quality of care that her daughter will receive. Second, in describing her poverty and leaving her last dollar with Mary, the beseeching mother illustrates that, in surrendering Mary, she does all of the things that a good, respectable mother would do. Finally, the beseeching mother closes her letter by asserting Mary’s name. As hard as the beseeching mother works to compose this maternal self, she also complicates it by creating linguistic distance between herself and her child and between herself and her role as a mother. The most pronounced way in which she creates this distance is through the vacillation between first- and third-person pronouns when referring to herself. This vacillation is common within the Foundling Letters, as the mothers’ pronoun use alternately identifies them grammatically as their infants’ mothers and also awards that identity to a mysterious third person. For instance, in discussing her poverty and inability to support Mary, the beseeching mother refers to herself as “its Poor mother…behold-ing to work.” The use of the third-person, impersonal phrase “its…mother” rather than the first-person pronoun “I” implies that another, third person is the mother who cannot support her child even though the context of the letter makes clear that the beseeching mother is talking about herself. Grammatically, the beseeching mother does not claim her role as mother here even though she simultaneously works to compose such a role for
herself elsewhere in the letter. The letter’s greeting “Your Humble Servant” presents a similar example, as the beseeching mother does not refer to herself in the first person, instead establishing a persona in which she serves the Sisters. In sum, throughout the opening deferent section of the letter in which she describes her weakness and vulnerability, the beseeching mother does not refer to herself in the first person, instead creating another mother who is weak and vulnerable and unable to support her child. However, in the second, more assertive half of the letter in which the beseeching mother argues that she is a good, respectable mother, the pronoun usage shifts, and the beseeching mother begins to refer to herself in the first person: “the last cent in my possession is one Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it.” When the beseeching mother is talking about herself as a good, respectable mother, she is “I,” is herself; however, when she frames herself as weak or describes herself as a failing mother, she becomes “its Poor mother,” creating a linguistic distance between herself and that motherly persona. The beseeching mother reifies this distance in the pronouns that she uses to refer to Mary.

Throughout the letter, Mary is always a depersonalized “it” or “this Baby,” but never “she” or “my baby.” Mary is thus linguistically depersonalized, creating a greater linguistic distance between her and her mother. Grammatically, after all, they are not ‘her’ and ‘I,’ but “it” and “its mother.”

The second way that the beseeching mother creates distance between herself and her role as Mary’s mother is by precluding a continued financial and/or physical relationship with her daughter. One of the most common strategies used in the 17-letter sample to assert motherhood is the assertion that the mother will either return for the child at a future date or will continue to provide financial support for the child through donations to the Foundling Asylum. Reclaiming the child or continuing to financially support the child implies that the Foundling mother will
continue to perform at least some of the central functions of parenthood. The beseeching mother does not mention or imply that she will be returning or sending money, implying that Mary’s residence at the Foundling is permanent and that the beseeching mother will not perform those functions. In sum, the beseeching mother composes a complex maternal role for herself within her letter as she simultaneously asserts herself as Mary’s mother and distances herself from that role. The beseeching mother, the most deferent of the three mothers analyzed in this chapter, balances deference and assertion by couching her assertions in deference. In couching her assertive appeals, the beseeching mother emphasizes how much she and her daughter need and deserve the Sisters’ help, an emphasis that also allows her to compose a complicated identity for herself as a good mother.

4.3 The Anonymous Mother

Like the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother argues for her child’s care and composes a maternal self through the balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; however, rather than balancing deference and assertion by couching, the anonymous mother composes for the Sisters of Charity who run the Foundling Asylum the role of partner in her son Joseph’s care. In casting herself as a partner, the anonymous mother asserts both her role as Joseph’s mother and her own respectability. In other words, rather than creating a pattern of interlocking uses of deference and assertion as does the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother balances deferent and assertive appeals in an attempt to compose an equal relationship with the Sisters. Her attempt illustrates variance in ways in which the Foundling mothers—the three presented in this chapter as case studies and the remaining 14 in this dissertation’s
sample—balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion to achieve similar rhetorical goals.

The anonymous mother’s letter, pictured below, was left with her son Joseph Cavalier on April 6th between 1870 and 1873 and is 130 words in length. Like that of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother’s letter follows some conventions of the letter genre, including the date and greeting at the top of the page; further, the letter’s organization can be described as three rhetorical moves similar to those made by the beseeching mother: the anonymous mother requests that Joseph be cared for, explains why the baby needs and deserves care, and identifies the continued role she will play in his life. Although the letters presented as case studies in this chapter appear to have similar organizations, this is not a pattern that holds across the 17-letter sample. The letters not presented as case studies are more varied in their organization. Overall, the anonymous mother balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion and composes a maternal role for herself by creating a situation within the letter in which she and the Sisters will be equal partners in Joseph’s upbringing; however, like the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother also distances herself from her role as mother, thus composing a complex maternity, as we will see. The anonymous mother’s letter, pictured below, reads as follows:

New York April 6th
My dear good sister:
Please accept this little outcast son of mine trusting with God’s help that I will be able to sustain it in your institution. I would not part with my baby were it in any way possible for me, to make a respectable living with it, but I cannot, and so ask you to take my little one, and with the assistance of our Blessed lady I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and to bring it clothes as often as my means will allow. This is no

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72 While the anonymous mother does not provide a year, the NYHS’ “Guide to the Foundling Hospital Collection” indicates that the scrapbook in which the letter is included only contains letters written between 1870 and 1873.
73 In selecting the case studies for this chapter and the next, I looked for letters that provided multiple, strong examples of the use of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion to compose maternal and respectable selves. This led me to select longer letters, and the longer letters were more likely to follow the traditional format of a letter.
The anonymous mother begins composing a partnership with the Sisters by establishing a kind of equal relationship, starting with the letter’s greeting “My dear good sister.” The use of the possessive pronoun implies that the Sisters belong to or are intimate with the anonymous mother, an assertion that evokes a measure of intimacy that sets up the potential for a partnership. The term “my Dear” is typically reserved for someone a speaker knows and is at least on equal footing with; it is not common to refer to a superior as “my Dear” (Sonmez), and the Sisters, as reformers and representatives of the Catholic Church, would have been the anonymous mother’s social, moral, and religious superiors (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Miller). The anonymous mother’s pronoun and adjective use can thus be read as an assertion of equality, as she embraces the freedom to refer to the Sisters so intimately. This intimacy is somewhat qualified, though, by the description of the Sisters as “good,” an adjective that sets an expectation for the Sisters’ behavior but couches that assertion in a compliment. The use of the adjective “good” functions as the first volley in the anonymous mother’s attempt to frame Joseph as needing and deserving the Sisters’ goodness. Further, describing the Sisters as “good” implies that the already are good, allowing the anonymous mother to compose a persona for the Sisters.
that she hopes they will accept. These attempts to frame Joseph as in need of and the Sisters as capable of such goodness continue in the letter’s first line.

Having established the Sisters’ goodness in the greeting, the anonymous mother builds on it in the first line of the letter: “Please accept this little outcast son of mine trusting with God’s help that I will be able to sustain it in your institution.” The use of “outcast” invites sympathy for Joseph—as his status as a foundling marks him as an outcast in the community and he is literally cast out by his mother—and implies that he needs the Sisters’ help. Establishing oneself as weak or vulnerable is a common strategy of deference (Daybell; Fitzpatrick); in this case, however, the anonymous mother qualifies that deference by framing Joseph rather than herself as weak or vulnerable. The deference implied by Joseph’s outcasting is further qualified by the second half of the sentence in which the anonymous mother references “God’s help.” The mention of God appeals to the Sisters’ sense of religious duty; however, it also functions as an assertive strategy that once again puts the anonymous mother on equal footing with the Sisters. The anonymous mother, the line implies, can rely on and is deserving of God’s help; despite the position in which she finds herself and despite the implication that she is a fallen woman, the anonymous mother has access to God and is worthy of God’s help just like the Sisters. Then, and perhaps most importantly, the anonymous mother asserts that “I will be able to sustain it in your institution” [emphasis mine]. The pronoun use indicates that it is the anonymous mother – not the Sisters – who will be sustaining Joseph. The Sisters are her partners, the providers of the means through which the anonymous mother can support her son. She and the Sisters will care for Joseph together.

The anonymous mother continues to build a partnership with the Sisters, but, having made the rather assertive declaration about sustaining Joseph, she backs off a bit and once again
defers by emphasizing her potential for economic and moral vulnerability: “I would not part with my baby were it in any way possible for me, to make a respectable living with it, but I cannot, and so ask you to take my little one.” In writing that she cannot live respectfully, and by extension maintain what is left of her social and moral respectability, while retaining custody of her son, the anonymous mother indicates that, although she is not yet a fallen woman, the potential exists and may be fulfilled if the Sisters decline to help her care for Joseph. The anonymous mother argues, in other words, that the Sisters would be culpable in her fall if they refuse to admit Joseph to the Foundling Asylum, asserting both her present respectability and the Sisters’ responsibility toward her. At the same time, she also asserts herself as Joseph’s mother; through the use of possessive, first-person pronouns—“my baby” and “my little one”—the anonymous mother claims symbolic or at least linguistic custody of Joseph. However, in the second half of the sentence, she also defers, acknowledging that she needs the Sisters in order to take care of Joseph—“and so ask you to take my little one”—formally asking them to take him in. In sum, the anonymous mother follows her assertive request with deference. That said, while the anonymous mother moves from assertion to deference and back again, she is never as deferent as is the beseeching mother.

After formally requesting that the Sisters care for Joseph and after acknowledging her potential moral and economic inferiority, the anonymous mother continues to compose a partnership with the Sisters and thus to establish her maternity; however, she also begins to argue that she is not just a mother, but a good mother—or at least a mother that participates in the physical and financial care of her child. The anonymous mother writes, “I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and to bring it clothes as

74 The anonymous mother’s argument for her social and moral respectability will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.
often as my means will allow.” By promising that she will participate in Joseph’s financial care, the anonymous mother again asserts that she and the Sisters are partners, establishing her maternity; however, her discussion of the partnership is more deferent than her earlier assertion that she would “sustain” Joseph in the Foundling Asylum. In the same breath that the anonymous mother discusses the ways in which she will continue to support Joseph financially, she must also acknowledge that she cannot do so at present and that she can only do so “as often as my means allow.” She, in other words, references to her own inability to support Joseph by making a tacit request that the Sisters do so, deferring, however subtly, via her own perceived weaknesses as a mother. This deference is followed by an assertion of her worth as a mother and as a person. She writes “this [leaving money and clothes in the contribution box] is no idle promise good sister I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty.” The anonymous mother, here, distinguishes herself from the other mothers who neglect their duty as parents. She asserts, in other words, that she is not the heartless mother who abandons her infant in the street or at the docks like the mothers sensationalized in newspapers of the period (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion); as a good mother, she will continue to provide and care for her child even if she needs the Sisters’ help to do so. The anonymous mother is quite assertive in her argument that she will fulfill her duty, as this is the only line in the letter that she does not qualify with deference.

As hard as the anonymous mother works rhetorically to create this partnership in which she continues to act as Joseph’s mother, there are also several ways in which she, like the beseeching mother, distances herself from her maternity. First, and perhaps most telling, unlike so many other Foundling mothers, the anonymous mother does not discuss or even imply that she will return for or retake custody of Joseph. The use of the verb “sustain” in the letter’s
opening line – “I will be able to sustain it in your institution” – and the reference to providing money from her earnings “each month” indicate that Joseph’s living at the Foundling Asylum and the anonymous mother’s partnership with the Sisters are both permanent. This potential permanency also helps explain why the anonymous mother is so assertive in creating a partnership with the Sisters: because she may not be returning for him, keeping up her part of the partnership is the way she will remain in Joseph’s life, will remain his mother. And yet, this partnership is undermined by the anonymous mother’s anonymity. Not only does she not include her own name, but she does not sign her letter at all. Further, the money she provides is to be placed in the “contribution box,” which she could do anonymously. Thus, as much as she asserts her role in Joseph’s life and linguistically connects herself to him, she will, in his reality, be anonymous. The anonymous mother, like the beseeching mother, balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion to create a complex maternity. In composing a partnership with the Sisters of Charity, the anonymous mother composes a reality in which she continues to act as Joseph’s mother and characterizes herself as a good mother. Even still, she also defers to her own potential for economic and moral weakness.

4.4 A Momma

While the anonymous mother, in creating a partnership with the Sisters, tempers her more assertive requests with deference, a momma, the author of the final letter analyzed in this chapter, does not temper; in fact, a momma is the most assertive of the three mothers whose letters are analyzed in this chapter. Her primary rhetorical strategy is to remove both herself and the Sisters from her letter using passive voice. In concealing herself and the Sisters as agents, a momma also conceals the power imbalance between them, allowing her to be more assertive.
This removal of both agents through passive voice, a rhetorical strategy of assertion, is also simultaneously deferent: the use of passive voice acknowledges the perceived inferiority of a momma even as it asserts her equality. The concealment of agents through passive voice makes conspicuous their absence; this conspicuous absence in turn makes both a momma and the Sisters, as well as their unequal power relationship, present.

A momma left her letter with her son Willie at the Foundling Asylum when Willie was one-day-old. The letter, 91 words in length, deviates slightly from the rhetorical structure used by the beseeching mother and the anonymous mother: instead, a momma first explains that she will return for Willie and then identifies the quality of care that Willie is to receive at the Foundling Asylum. These rhetorical moves—asserting a role as the child’s mother and directing that the child be well cared for—read as slight inversions of the beseeching mother and anonymous mother’s similar rhetorical moves; both the anonymous mother and beseeching mother open with their request that the child be cared for and then assert their roles as mothers.

A momma's letter can be seen below and reads as follows:

Figure 4.4 A momma’s letter, New York Historical Society.
To the Sister:

This child will be claimed; as soon as possible; how soon I do not know. But all expenses will be paid in full; so please take the best of care possible to be taken. His name is Willie C. Please do not have the chain & Locket taken off and let the child have it all the time, so as to be identified; as no mistake must be made as to which child is the one wanted. He was born yesterday a momma

the 13 of January 1877

A momma balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion by using passive voice to remove herself from the letters, a strategy that begins with the first line of the letter: "This child will be claimed." There are none of the beseeching mother’s couching or the anonymous mother’s partnerships; instead, a momma simply advises the Sisters of what will occur. This assertiveness, though, is still masked throughout the letter with a kind of deference: a momma removes herself linguistically from the letter so that it is a mysterious third person, “a momma” rather than a specific individual, who makes these assertive requests. This removal is accomplished through the use of passive voice coupled with her anonymous signature; when discussing actions that she will take, a momma uses passive voice, writing, for example, that “This child will be claimed” and that “expenses will be paid in full” rather than that ‘I will claim the child’ or that ‘I will pay the expenses.’ This lack of an agent conceals slightly the power relationship between a momma and the Sisters by refusing to name the parties involved and, by extension, their relative inferiority or superiority in relationship to each other. In concealing this power relationship, a momma creates the ability to be more assertive in her demands that Willie be cared for and in her construction of a maternal role.

Further, when asserting her requests for Willie’s care, a momma removes not only herself but the Sisters as well, never using personal pronouns to directly refer to them either. The letter is addressed to “the sister,” but they are not mentioned or addressed directly anywhere else in the letter. For example, midway through the letter, a momma asserts a request: “please take the best
of care possible to be taken.” Context dictates that this request is made of the Sisters, but a momma never linguistically identifies them. She never refers to them as “sisters” or even as “you.” She further writes, “please do not have the chain & Locket off and let the child have it all the time, So as to be identified; as no mistake must be made as to which child is the one wanted.” Again, although it is an implied address, a momma does not identify linguistically who would be allowing the child to keep the locket or who would be making the mistake. She uses passive voice and lack of personal pronouns to remove the Sisters from the letter in the same way that she removes herself. This removal, while it reads as assertive, also reads as deferent because, without that uneven power relationship or sense of social or moral inferiority, there would be no need to remove anyone.

As assertive as a momma is throughout her letter, this assertion is somewhat migrated by underlying deference. The single time that a momma refers to herself in first-person, active voice is a bit ambiguous: “This child will be claimed; as soon as possible; how soon I do not know.” She attributes to herself (using the first-person pronoun I) the not knowing when she will return but not the claiming of the child; in doing so, a momma directly acknowledges her uncertainty in when and how she will claim Willie, revealing the deference behind her assertion. Removing herself from the letter enables a momma to make assertive requests about her son Willie’s care because the requests come not from her as an individual who could be perceived as socially, morally, and religiously inferior to the Sisters but from a mother but not necessarily a specific mother, mitigating the need for and acting as a form of deference. This removal is compounded by her use of the indefinite article in her signature. She is a momma rather than a specific mother. In other words, breaking her pattern of passive voice by referring to herself as ‘I’ calls attention to that pattern and by extension the need for it.
While the use of passive voice allows a momma to assertively petition for her son Willie’s care, it is also the means through which she composes a maternal self, as that removal lends itself to a focus on Willie. Everything that a momma writes – “This child will be claimed,” “please take the best of care possible to be taken,” “His name is Willie C,” “He was born yesterday the 13 of January 1877” – is focused on Willie. There isn’t a focus on her poverty or an explanation of her circumstances as seen in the beseeching mother’s letter. There isn’t a focus on the relationship that she will have with the Sisters, as is seen in the anonymous mother’s letter. Every sentence of the letter contains a reference to Willie or to Willie’s care. Further, Willie is the only person who is referenced in the letter by name or by personal pronoun (apart from the one instance discussed above in which a momma refers to herself as I). A momma writes, for example, that “His name is Willie C” and that “He was born yesterday” [emphasis mine]. A momma requests that “the child have it [the locket] all the time” and advises that “This child will be claimed” [emphasis mine]. The person who is most present in the letter is Willie. Additionally, a momma focuses on her future relationship with Willie, asserting that their maternal relationship will continue because Willie’s residence at the Foundling Asylum is temporary. A momma, in her focus on Willie, asserts herself as his mother even as she removes herself from her letter. A Momma also attempts to retain a physical connection to Willie through the locket. She is adamant that “the child have it all the time, So as to be identified.” The locket, then, serves as a marker that Willie is hers and functions as physical evidence of the maternal connection between them.

Although a momma asserts herself as Willie’s mother, erasing herself from the letter also creates distance between herself and that role. She is a mother, in other words, partially in the abstract. Other than the instance in which she admits that she does not know when Willie will be
claimed, she is not an *I* in the letter. She is not even, as with the beseeching mother, “its…mother.” She is an unnamed, obscured agent. This is the case even in her signature. She does, in signing the letter as “a momma,” claim the label ‘mother’ and its associated role; however, the use of the indefinite article still creates distance. She identifies herself as *a* momma but not as *his* momma or *the* momma. A momma is a mother, and the context of the letter implies that she is Willie’s mother; however, she stops short of asserting and specifying that, composing a complex, partially abstract maternal self.

A momma balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion by using passive voice to remove herself and the Sisters from her letter. Concealing the agents in the letter allows a momma to work around the unequal power relationship between herself and the Sisters. As a result, she is able to be primarily assertive in her arguments that her son Willie should receive “the best of care possible to be taken” and that she will continue to act as the child’s mother.

### 4.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have offered three case studies that illustrate how Foundling mothers balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in arguing for their maternity. The letters of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma were chosen for case studies because they exemplify the variations in the ways that Foundling mothers balance deference and assertion and because they make particularly strong arguments for their worth as mothers. The anonymous mother couches her assertive appeals in deference so that she is able to illustrate how much she and her daughter Mary need the Sisters’ help and to make a case for herself as a good mother. The anonymous mother composes a role for herself as her son Joseph’s mother by creating a partnership with the Sisters in which they will care for Joseph together. Finally, a
momma uses passive voice to remove herself and the Sisters from the letter, concealing the unequal power relationship with the Sisters and making Willie the Sisters’ responsibility, allowing a momma to assert her maternity. Taken together, the case studies illustrate several implications about how the Foundling mothers use deference and assertion as rhetorical strategies and how they use writing in their everyday lives.

While each of the mothers uses similar rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion, they combine them into unique dominant strategies. As the case studies illustrated, each of the three Foundling mothers has a dominant rhetorical strategy and uses other strategies of deference and assertion in service of that strategy. For example, the anonymous mother’s primary rhetorical strategy was to create a partnership with the Sisters in which she remained Joseph’s mother; however, in creating that partnership, she also appealed to the economic, moral, and physical vulnerability of herself and her son, used adjectives to set expectations of behavior, and used possessive pronouns to linguistically claim maternity. The beseeching mother uses similar strategies but combines them in order to couch her assertions in deference. Thus, the case studies illustrate that the Foundling mothers, although they use similar rhetorical strategies, combine them in different ways and put them to different uses that are unique to the mother.

There may be a correlation between the rhetorical goal—securing care for the child and composing a maternal self—and whether the Foundling mother favored deference or assertion. The Founding mothers tend to defer when petitioning for their children’s care, but to assert when composing maternal selves. This may happen because the deferring often takes the form of appeals to weakness, which then creates the need to clarify that this weakness does not mean that the women are bad mothers or are not mothers at all. Further, the Foundling mothers are surrendering children that they will likely never see again, an action that would belie motherhood
in its Victorian, Republican definition. In other words, the two goals of securing care and asserting motherhood would seem to be at odds with each other, requiring a complex balance of rhetorical strategies that themselves would seem to contrast each other. Further, the letters are likely to be the final space in which the mothers can explain their actions to the Sisters, to their children, and to themselves, allowing the letters to function as a space in which the mothers can construct a reality in which they both do and do not remain mothers.

In composing a maternal self, the Foundling mothers assert that they are mothers and/or outline a relationship in which they continue to act as mothers. The maternal identity composed by the Foundling mothers is complex, as they assert that they are good mothers despite surrendering custody of their children. The anonymous mother is a strong example of a Foundling mother arguing that she will remain the child’s mother even after he or she enters the Foundling Asylum. Such an argument may be necessary because of the conceptions of motherhood that dominated the Victorian era. As discussed in chapter two, Victorian notions of motherhood were dominated by ideals of Republican motherhood in which mothers were responsible for inculcating their children with a morality and work ethic that would create responsible citizens (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Welter; Dye and Smith). In surrendering custody of their children, the Foundling mothers decline this role, whether out of choice or desperation. Thus, mothers like the anonymous mother use their letters to compose a reality in which they continue to at least partially fulfill this maternal role. In addition to arguing that they are mothers, many Foundling mothers also argue that they are good mothers. The beseeching mother, for example, asserts that 1) she is giving her last penny to her daughter Mary and that 2) the depth of her poverty means that she needs that dollar very much. Such an action aligns with the ideology of the Republican mother, whose job was to give her all—financially and
spiritually—to her children and their wellbeing. The drive to illustrate that they are not just mothers but also good mothers can be seen as an extension of both the construction of maternity, as discussed in this chapter, and of respectability, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

*The maternity constructed by the Foundling mothers is further complicated by the linguistic distance that they build between themselves and that role.* One of the most interesting aspects of the maternity constructed by the Foundling mothers is that, in the same breath that they assert their maternity, they also linguistically distance themselves from it. The beseeching mother, for example, refers to herself alternately in third person—“its Poor mother”—and first person. In moments when she is discussing ways that she may not fit the Victorian ideal of motherhood, she creates distance between herself and that failure; however, when she describes the ways in which she does act as a good mother, she claims that behavior with “I”. This kind of distancing makes sense in light of both 1) the seeming contradiction that the Founding mothers manage between surrendering a child and remaining his or her mother and 2) the emotional devastation that the Foundling mothers must feel—and perhaps protect themselves from, at least partially—in giving up children that they will likely never see again.

*While the Foundling mothers compose maternal selves by balancing both deference and assertion, the degrees to which they defer and assert vary both within and between letters.* Although the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma—as well as the remaining mothers in the sample—all defer and assert to some extent, they do not do so to the same degree. For example, the beseeching mother is significantly more deferent than is a momma. It is also important to note, however, that the relative degree of deference and assertion varies within the letters as well. For example, although the beseeching mother is the most deferent of the three, she becomes less deferent as her letter progresses and as the extreme
deference of the letter’s opening line—“Your Humble Servant Beseeches you kind Sister to be kind to this Baby and may god Reward you”—gives way to the relative assertiveness of the final line—“The infants name is Mary Dwyre.” The same can be said of a momma; although she is assertive overall in her letter, there are sentences in which a momma is less assertive than others. For example, her letter begins quite assertively, as she states that “This child will be claimed;” however, she becomes less assertive in the middle of her letter when she requests “Please do not have the chain & Locket taken off” rather than stating or demanding it. In other words, there are variations in the degree of deference and assertion both between and within each Foundling Letter.

While each mother works to fulfill three rhetorical goals—to secure care for their children, to compose a maternal self, and to compose a respectable self—they do so with different emphases. In other words, these rhetorical goals are not always given the same weight. While the Foundling mothers all work to secure care for their children, some focus more on maternity than respectability and vice versa. A momma, for example, focuses almost exclusively on asserting a maternal identity and does not spend much time arguing for her own respectability. In contrast, the anonymous mother asserts her respectability directly. In arguing that she cannot “make a respectable living” if she retains custody of Joseph, the anonymous mother implies that she currently is respectable, as vulnerable as that respectability might be. Although I do not analyze respectability in the case studies of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma—as this chapter focuses on maternity and the letters were chosen for case studies in part because they emphasize maternity—each of them do assert their respectability to varying degrees.
In sum, this chapter presented three case studies in order to illustrate 1) the ways in which three Foundling mothers balance deference and assertion in order to compose a maternal identity and 2) variations in the ways in which they do so. These case studies build on the strategies of deference and assertion outlined in the previous chapter, illustrating how these strategies work together. In the next chapter, I present three new case studies that demonstrate how Foundling mothers balance deference and assertion to compose respectable identities and to argue for their worth as women.
CHAPTER FIVE

“HER STILL HONERED MOTHER”: COMPOSING A RESPECTABLE SELF

5.1 Introduction

In July of 1870, infant Catherine Duffy was surrendered to the Foundling Asylum along with a note:

_Baptize her and name her Catherine Duffy – As she is entrusted in your holy care it is needless to say Be kind to her Her still honered mother_

While the bulk of this brief note focuses on Catherine, the mother does use the note’s final element, her signature, to assert her social respectability and her worth as a woman. Naming herself “her still honered mother,” the mother asserts that she retains her honor, implying that Catherine was not born out of wedlock and that the still honered mother is not a fallen woman. Expressing such respectability is one of the rhetorical purposes common to the Foundling Letters; however, the Letters illustrate a broad definition of _respectability_. For some Foundling mothers, like the still honered mother, respectability is tied to premarital sex and issues of legitimacy, as inferred from its repeated mention in letters from this dissertation’s 17-letter sample and in letters from the 1000-letter corpus. For such mothers, asserting their respectability focuses on illustrating that their children were not born out of wedlock and that they are still virtuous—although not virginal—women. Other Foundling mothers assert their respectability based on religion. For example, C.T., whose
grandson John Darien was surrendered to the Foundling on December 18, 1872, writes of her
daughter (John’s mother), “I her mother, will do the best I can for her, will not cast her off. I
must do my duty as a good Catholic.” While C.T. strives to do her duty as a good Catholic
mother by refusing to abandon her daughter, she also links her identity as a respectable woman,
as well as that of her daughter, with sexuality: “The mother is young and poor, was always good
before this, was taken in knows little of the world.” Respectability for C.T. thus lies at the
intersection of sexuality and religion, evoking the figure of the good Catholic girl75: a virginal,
hardworking young woman providing for her family and community (Fitzgerald Habits of
Compassion). As the figure of the good Catholic girl illustrates, sexuality, responsibility, and
faith were intimately connected to respectability. For still other Foundling mothers, respectability
is tied to intent, with many noting that they did not consciously choose to be single mothers, did
not consciously choose to lose their respectability. Prevailing attitudes about women dictated
that women who had lost their virginity—which a new or expectant mother certainly had—had
by extension lost their respectability (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Dye and Smith;
Gilje). Thus, many Foundling mothers in both this dissertation’s sample and the 1000-letter
corpus argue that they did not intend to be single. The assertion that the mothers were abandoned
by men they trusted, had been promised marriage, or were otherwise not responsible for their
perceived fall is a common refrain. For example, one mother writes in an undated letter, “the
mother of the child is a respectable Irish girl, betrayed against her will and in consequence would
not keep the little one.” This mother’s story is the most extreme example of the intent argument,
as her letter implies that she may have been sexually assaulted, but many other Foundling
mothers assert their respectability by arguing that they made respectable choices in good faith

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75 For a more in-depth discussion of the good Catholic girl, please see chapter two, section 2.2.1.
and that their circumstances are primarily the consequence of the disreputable choices of others, primarily the fathers of their children.

The letters analyzed in this chapter illustrate a similarly broad definition of respectability. The three mothers—the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper, and Theresa Perazzo—all balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to argue for their own respectability; however, the form that respectability takes varies between them, as does the strategies they use to argue it. The anonymous mother creates a partnership with the Sisters of Charity in which they can help her maintain her respectability by ensuring that her poverty does not necessitate a turn to prostitution. Mrs. Cooper balances deference and assertion by characterizing herself and her son Walter as victims of circumstances beyond her control and asserts her respectability by focusing on the legitimacy of her children. Finally, Theresa Perazzo, the most assertive of the three women, argues for her respectability by focusing her letter almost entirely on herself, treating her maternity as a fact that need not be argued. Taken together, the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper, and Theresa Perazzo illustrate differing definitions of respectability and differing strategies used to argue that they fulfill those definitions.

**5.2 The Anonymous Mother**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the anonymous mother balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to secure care for her son Joseph and to compose a maternal self.\(^\text{76}\) In this chapter, I revisit the anonymous mother’s letter in order to explore how she argues for her worth as a mother and as a woman. Each of the Foundling mothers argue for both their maternity and respectability, but, for the purposes of analysis, I examine the two in...
In revisiting the anonymous mother’s letter, I illustrate how maternity and respectability are addressed simultaneously.

To briefly review, the anonymous mother surrendered her son Joseph Cavalier to the Foundling Asylum on April 6\textsuperscript{th}, between 1870 and 1873\textsuperscript{77}. In her 130-word letter, the anonymous mother balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion by composing a partnership with the Sisters of Charity in which they work together to care for Joseph and, as I will illustrate below, to maintain the anonymous mother’s respectability. In doing so, the anonymous mother asserts her continued maternity and respectability. The letter is organized in three rhetorical moves: the anonymous mother 1) asks that Joseph be cared for, 2) explains why he needs and deserves the Sisters’ care, and 3) outlines her continued role in his life. As the anonymous mother argues for Joseph’s care, she makes the Sisters equal partners in not just raising Joseph but also retaining and maintaining her respectability. The anonymous mother’s letter reads as follows:

\begin{center}
\textit{New York April 6\textsuperscript{th}}

\textit{My dear good sister:}

Please accept this little outcast son of mine trusting with God's help that I will be able to sustain it in your institution. I would not part with my baby were it in any way possible for me, to make a respect-able living with it, but I cannot, and so ask you to take my little one, and with the assistance of our Blessed lady I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and to bring it clothes as often as my means will allow. This is no idle promise good sister I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty. It name is Joseph Cavalier
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{77} The anonymous mother's letter lists the date as April 6\textsuperscript{th}, but does not provide the year. The New York Historical Society’s “Guide to the Records of the New York Foundling Hospital” indicates that the letters in the scrapbook that houses the anonymous mother’s letter were all written between 1870 and 1873.
The rhetorical sophistication of the anonymous mother’s approach lies in how she implicates the Sisters in either her continued respectable future or her potential fall. The anonymous mother writes, “Please accept this little outcast son of mine trusting with God’s help that I will be able to sustain it in your institution.” In this first sentence, the anonymous mother creates a partnership with the Sisters, as discussed in chapter four\textsuperscript{78}, by focusing on the ways in which they will work together to care for Jacob. As the anonymous mother indicates, she will be sustaining Joseph, and the Sisters will provide the institution in which to do so. In the second sentence, the anonymous mother extends this partnership to include her own respectability: “I would not part with my baby were it in any way possible for me, to make a respect-able living with it, but I cannot, and so ask you to take my little one.” She implies here that her fall, although it has not happened yet, is a possibility that may come to pass if the Sisters refuse to take custody of Joseph. The anonymous mother’s use of deference and assertion appeals to the Foundling Asylum’s mission to “rescue…fallen women before they have sunk to the hopeless depths of misery and crime” (Sisters of Charity \textit{Third Annual Report 6}), or to keep vulnerable women from the fate of the fallen woman. The narrative of the fallen woman, as outlined in chapter two\textsuperscript{79}, details the story of a young, vulnerable woman who is seduced and abandoned by a man. Abandoned, she has no choice but to support herself and her child through prostitution, leading to depression, poverty, alcoholism, and eventually infanticide and suicide (Miller; Fitzgerald \textit{Habits of Compassion}; Sisters of Charity; Campbell). The narrative or identity of the fallen woman cannot be tied to a single origin. It was a device popular in novels, songs, and other fictional texts of the period. It was also a popular rhetorical strategy used by newspapers and religious pamphlets to generate sympathy and fear. But, the figure of the fallen woman also

\textsuperscript{78} See chapter four, section 4.3.
\textsuperscript{79} Please see chapter two, section 2.2.2 for a full discussion of the narrative of the fallen woman.
reflected and was shaped by the realities of women like the anonymous mother. In writing that she cannot “make a respect-able living”—a phrase that references prostitution—while retaining custody of her son, the anonymous mothers defers to the potential moral, economic, and physical vulnerability detailed by the figure of the fallen woman, indicating that such vulnerability is a possibility for the anonymous mother. After all, the fallen woman can be read as the victim in the narrative written for her, cast as inferior to the man who seduces and abandons her. In implying that she has the potential to become a fallen woman, the anonymous mother also associates herself with the fallen woman’s inferiority and vulnerability. It is the intervention of the Sisters, the anonymous mother implies, that will keep this vulnerability from being realized.

In creating this partnership, though, the anonymous mother asserts that she is respectable, raising the potential for that respectability to be lost but highlighting her desire to retain it. Her assertion that she would not surrender Joseph “were it in any way possible for me, to make a respect-able living with it, but I cannot” implies that she currently is making a respectable living and currently is a respectable woman. She needs the Sisters’ help to maintain her respectability, not to regain or recreate it. The anonymous mother here defines respectability in relationship to sexuality and morality. The figure of the prostitute in Victorian America included not just sex, but also alcoholism, theft, greed, and a lack of morality and ethics that stood in contrast to behavior desired for respectable, virtuous women (Miller; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion; Stansell). The anonymous mother asserts her respectability by arguing that she is not currently and does not want to become such a person. Interestingly, she makes this argument without reference to Joseph’s parentage, declining to explain whether or not Joseph is legitimate. The definition of respectability that she composes and represents herself as fulfilling does not seem to include illegitimacy, a standard that the anonymous mother may not meet.
The anonymous mother further separates herself from the figure of the selfish, immoral fallen woman in her description of the ways in which she will fulfill her maternal duties toward Joseph, or will act in her continued role as his mother. The anonymous mother writes, “I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and to bring it clothes as often as my means will allow. This is no idle promise good sister I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty”. The anonymous mother acknowledges that many mothers make and break such promises, mothers that perhaps fit the mold of the immoral and uncaring fallen woman. Victorian novels, newspapers, and charity pamphlets were inconsistent and paradoxical in their depictions of the fallen woman, creating a figure who was sometimes a villain—an immoral, uncaring woman who revels in a life of vice—sometimes a victim—a young girl to be pitied and assisted—and sometimes an uncomfortable amalgamation of both. The anonymous mother defers to the Sisters by evoking the inferior identity of the fallen woman; however, she also asserts that she is the victim to be pitied and assisted. Even this deference, though, is limited, as the anonymous mother asserts that she is still respectable. In other words, the anonymous mother defers by invoking the elements of the identity of the fallen woman that will serve her argument, but then asserts that she does not fulfill all aspects of that identity.

In sum, the anonymous mother defers in that she appeals to the potential for her own weakness and creates a situation in which the Sisters have the power to keep that potential from being realized; in creating this situation, though, she asserts her desire for respectability and is clear that the potential for her downfall has yet to be realized.
5.3 Mrs. Cooper

Like the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper argues for both her maternity and her respectability; however, she is considerably more deferent and composes a slightly different definition of respectability. Mrs. Cooper’s primary strategy of deference is to cast herself and her son Walter as victims of circumstances beyond her control, circumstances that the Sisters of Charity have the ability to influence. Mrs. Cooper argues that in taking care of Walter, the Sisters have the power to save her and all four of her children, whom she cannot care for without the Sisters’ help. This notion of control is central Mrs. Cooper’s assertion of respectability. Her choices, she argues in her letter, were good, respectable choices; however, her husband’s choices have stranded her in a situation—a single mother surrendering custody of an infant son—in which she does not appear respectable.

Mrs. Cooper’s letter, dated January 21, 1871, is one of the longer Founding Letters at 202 words. The letter is formatted like a formal letter—including a date, greeting, and signature—and makes four rhetorical moves that are each two or three sentences in length. First, Mrs. Cooper introduces Walter, explains his circumstances, and asks that he be cared for. Second, she requests that Walter be christened, appealing to the Sisters’ religious sense of duty. Third, Mrs. Cooper further explains her own circumstances, arguing that such circumstances are not her fault. Finally, she ends the letter by stating that she hopes to return for Walter and by identifying her continuing role as his mother. Throughout these rhetorical moves, Mrs. Cooper balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to assert her respectability and worth as a woman. Mrs. Cooper’s letter reads as follows:

While Mrs. Cooper does not include a date in her letter, markings made by the Foundling Asylum staff in pencil at the top of the letter indicate that Walter was admitted to the Foundling on February 21, 1871. Whether these markings were made in 1871 when Walter arrived at the Asylum or later when the scrapbooks were compiled is unknown.
New York tuesday

Kind Sisters,

you will find a little boy he is a month old to
morrow it father will not do anything and it is a
poor little boy it mother has to work to keep 3
others and can not do anything with this one it
name is Walter Cooper and he is not christen yet
will you be so good as to do it I should not like him
to die with out it his mother might claim him some
day I have been married 5 years and I married
respectfully and I did not think my husband was a
bad man I had to leave him and I could not trust
my children to him now I do not know where he is
and he has not seen this one yet I have not a dollar
in the world to give him or I would give it to him I
wish you would keep him for 3 or 4 month and if he
is not claimed by that time you may be sure it
mother can not support it I may some day send
some money to him do not forget his name

Yours Respectfully,
Mrs Cooper

Mrs. Cooper balances strategies of deference and assertion in a repeating pattern: first,
she makes a deferent appeal that casts her and Walter as victims of circumstance and appeals to
the Sisters’ sense of sympathy and duty; then, she follows with a more assertive appeal that
highlights her lack of culpability for those circumstances. This pattern repeats throughout the
letter. Mrs. Cooper begins the pattern in the letter’s greeting in which she addresses her letter to
the “Kind Sisters.” Mrs. Cooper’s use of the adjective “Kind” both establishes and appeals to the
Sisters’ kindness, functioning as a descriptor of the Sisters themselves and of their work. In other
words, in describing the Sisters as kind, Mrs. Copper simultaneously flatters the Sisters and
asserts their obligation to be kind to Walter. Then, in the letter’s opening lines, Mrs. Cooper
makes clear that Walter, through no fault of his own, is in need of this kindness: “you will find a
little boy he is a month old to morrow it father will not do anything and it is a poor little boy it

Figure 5.3 Mrs. Cooper’s letter, New
York Historical Society.

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mother has to work to keep 3 others and can not do anything with this one.” Here Mrs. Cooper describes Walter’s plight—he is little, barely a month old, and poor, his mother cannot afford to care for him, and his father is gone—framing Walter as a victim of circumstance in need of the kindness established in the letter’s opening. At the same time, she establishes that Walter is innocent in relationship to those circumstances. After all, a one-month-old infant is not responsible for the loss of his father or the poverty of his mother. Establishing the Sisters’ kindness and positioning Walter as a victim of circumstance are common deferent strategies that serve to emphasize the Sisters’ power and Mrs. Cooper’s relative inferiority in relationship to that power.

Mrs. Cooper uses these common strategies of deference in order to couch her more assertive requests. After framing Walter as a victim of circumstance, she makes a direct request regarding his care: “it name is Walter Cooper and he is not criisten yet will you be so good as to do it I should not like him to die with out it.” She couches, here, her assertive requests with appeals to deference. She describes Walter—poor, young, without parents to care for him—asserts a request, and then mentions his potential death, which was a real possibility. Although the Foundling Asylum had a much better infant mortality rate than did the almshouses that sheltered foundling infants prior to late 1860s, the Foundling Asylum’s mortality rate still hovered between 50% and 60% throughout the 1870s (English 703-704); thus, the potential that Walter could die unbaptized was a very real concern, one to which the Sisters would have responded. Although Mrs. Cooper veils her assertion linguistically—simply commenting that she “should not like” for Walter to die unchristened and letting both Walter’s plight and the specter of his death do the rest—she nonetheless attempts to assert that Walter’s circumstances are not his fault and to use Walter’s need to disguise an assertive request.

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After framing Walter as an innocent victim of circumstances, Mrs. Cooper then frames herself as the same. This innocence is the basis for her continued respectability. The entire middle section of Mrs. Cooper’s letter is devoted to explaining that, despite being unable to care for Walter, she is still respectable:

I have been married 5 years and I married respectfully and I did not think my husband was a bad man. I had to leave him and I could not trust my children to him now I do not know where he is and he has not seen this one yet.

Mrs. Cooper explains here that she tried to do what a good, respectable Victorian woman and mother is supposed to do. She is not without virtue, as she married someone she thought was a good man and had legitimate children. She provides for her children’s safety and wellbeing, leaving her husband in order to protect them. She still cares for her three older children, working to provide for them as a good mother should. Mrs. Cooper fulfills, in other words, the expectations of Victorian motherhood (Gilje; Welter; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*; Miller; Dye and Smith). In making these claims, she anticipates what the Sisters – as representations of the larger cultural discourse about women, motherhood, and sexuality – might think of the mother of a foundling child. Mrs. Cooper asserts, in other words, that she does not fit the narrative of the fallen woman, as most mothers of foundlings were presumed to. Mrs. Copper is not the “poor girl led away by intrigue, or even willfully straying from virtue” (*Sisters of Charity Report* (1871) 5) who must now repent or risk self-destruction. Mrs. Cooper argues, in other words, that her choices were respectable and that the disreputable choices of others, primarily those of her husband, have condemned her to a situation that would seem to undermine her respectability.

Mrs. Cooper’s primary rhetorical strategy is to argue that she is a victim of circumstances beyond her control, tying her respectability to that fact that she is not responsible for those
circumstances. She does so not just by following her deferent appeals with assertive ones, but by doing so repeatedly, creating a pattern of deferring, asserting, and then deferring again; however, she consistently moves between the two at varying speeds. In the section of her letter in which Mrs. Cooper requests that Walter be cared for and christened, she defers for several sentences—48 words of a 200-word letter—before asserting herself for a single 14-word sentence and moving quickly back to deference. In contrast, in the final section of the letter, Mrs. Cooper moves from deference to assertion and back again in the same 42-word section. Mrs. Cooper’s pattern of deference and assertion, as well the variance in how quickly she moves between the two, is illustrated by this final section of the letter in which Mrs. Cooper repeats her request that the Sisters care for Walter and articulates her desire to return for him soon. Mrs. Cooper begins by writing that “I have not a dollar in the world to give him or I would give it to him,” detailing both her poverty and her desire to care for Walter, a desire that she cannot fulfill because of her impoverished circumstances for which she is not to blame. This deferent appeal, in which Mrs. Cooper once again casts herself and her son as victims of circumstance, is followed by the more assertive request that “I wish you [the Sisters] would keep him 3 or 4 month.” Finally, Mrs. Cooper ends this section by advising that “if he is not claimed by that time you may be sure it mother can not support it.” Mrs. Cooper here evokes the very situation to which the Foundling was created to respond (Miller; Sisters of Charity; Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion) and uses gentle language – she “wishes” rather than requests—to simultaneously defer to the Sisters and assert that Walter be cared for. This pattern of deferring, asserting, and then deferring again, and the relative quickness with which she does so, allows Mrs. Cooper to petition for Walter’s care while still maintaining her respectability.
Mrs. Cooper’s pronoun use further asserts her respectability. Like the beseeching mother and the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper vacillates between first and third person when discussing herself as a mother, identifying with and creating linguistic distance from that role; however, Mrs. Cooper consistently uses first person in asserting her own respectability. There is, in other words, no wavering in composing herself as a respectable woman. In the first lines of the letter, Mrs. Cooper writes that “it mother has to work to keep three others” rather than ‘I have to work to keep three others,’ using the third person to create distance between herself and the mother who cannot provide for Walter. In the lines directly following, when discussing Walter’s christening and asserting herself as Walter’s mother, she switches pronouns, using the first person to identify herself as Walter’s mother, writing “I should not like him to die without it.” In the very next sentence, though, she reifies the linguistic distance between herself and the mother who cannot provide for her child, writing that “his mother might claim him.” Here, Mrs. Cooper uses the first person to identify herself as a good or respectable mother, but uses third person to discuss what others may view as her failings as a mother. The pronoun use in the section of the letter in which she most clearly asserts her respectability, however, never waivers. In discussing her marriage, her husband, and her need to leave him, Mrs. Cooper always refers to herself in the first person:

I have been married 5 years and I married respectfully and I did not think my husband was a bad man I had to leave him and I could not trust my children to him now I do not know where he is and he has not seen this one yet

In the sections of the letter in which she describes why she is not responsible for her circumstances, or in which she explains why she is a respectable woman, Mrs. Cooper linguistically owns the events and actions discussed. In the section in which she presents her own victimhood, Mrs. Cooper creates linguistic distance using third person.
Finally, Mrs. Cooper asserts her respectability in the letter’s salutation and signature: “Respectfully Yours Mrs. Cooper.” The use of the term “Respectfully Yours” can be read two ways. Mrs. Cooper may be indicating that she respects the Sisters of Charity, using the pronoun “Yours” to further indicate her indebtedness to them. At the same time, Mrs. Cooper uses the signature to denote her own respectability. The respectability implied by “Respectfully Yours” is further emphasized by her signature, in which Mrs. Cooper pointedly identifies her marital status and, by extension, the legitimacy of her children.

Overall, Mrs. Cooper’s letter illustrates clearly her sophisticated balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. She defers in that she frames herself and Walter as victims of circumstances beyond her control, but she also assertively casts herself as an agent. She did something powerful to protect her four children and asserts that throughout her letter. And yet, her assertion of this power and her social respectability is still veiled in appeals to sympathy and powerlessness.

5.4 Theresa Perazzo

Theresa Perazzo, this chapter’s final case study, uses a strategy similar to that of Mrs. Cooper in that Theresa frames herself as a victim of circumstances beyond her control; however, she accomplishes this framing differently than does Mrs. Cooper. Really, many things about Theresa Perazzo’s letter are different than those of other Foundling mothers. Theresa signs her own name, an action taken by only four of the 17 Foundling Mothers mother studied in this dissertations sample. Theresa Perazzo does not vacillate between first- and third-person

81 I assume in my reading of the letter that Theresa Perazzo is in fact her real name.
82 In the 17-letter sample, three Foundling mothers sign their letters with ‘a momma’ or a similar name, ten do not sign their letters at all, and four sign their proper names.
pronouns in referring to herself; she is always “I.” She does not name her child, identify the child’s gender, or provide his or her age, actions that are common not only to mothers’ letter and notes, but also to fathers’ letters, short notes, and letters of recommendation and introduction. When Theresa does mention the child, she refers to the child as “my baby,” ensuring that the child is mentioned only in relationship to her and that her linguistic possession of the child is clear. Theresa Perazzo’s entire letter is focused on Theresa, on her present circumstances, and on her plans for her future. I do not point this out to condemn Theresa, but to identify the ways in which her deviations from the other Foundling mothers point to her primary rhetorical strategy: she focuses almost entirely on asserting her respectability. Theresa’s maternity is treated as a fact that does not need arguing and is, therefore, a minor part of her letter. Further, the definition of respectability that Theresa composes differs from that of Mrs. Cooper and of the anonymous mother. While Mrs. Cooper focuses on legitimacy and the anonymous mother argues that she is not yet a fallen woman, Theresa combines these claims to argue that she remains respectable because 1) her fall was not entirely her fault and 2) she is more than capable of raising her social status with the Sisters’ help.

Theresa Perazzo surrendered her unnamed son or daughter to the Foundling Asylum on December 3rd, 1874 along with her 89-word letter. The letter is formatted very much like a formal letter. It is addressed to “Sister Superioress,” contains a single paragraph, and concludes with a closing sentiment, Theresa’s name, and the date. The single paragraph that constitutes the body of the letter makes three rhetorical moves. First, Theresa introduces herself and explains her circumstances. Second, she requests that her child be admitted to the Foundling Asylum. Third, she explains her plans to “bring up” herself and retake custody of her baby. In doing so,

83 Please see chapter two, section 2.3.1 for a discussion of the different types of letters found in the 1000-letter corpus archived at the New York Historical Society.
Theresa dynamically balances rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to argue for her respectability and her ability to improve her circumstances. Theresa’s letter reads as follows:

Sister Superioress
I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am at present with no means and without any relatives to nurse my Baby Therefore I beg you for God sake to take my child; until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray God for you
I remain humble servant

Theresa Perazzo
New York Dec 3rd 1874

While Theresa does balance deference and assertion, she does not do so in as clear or clean a pattern as do Mrs. Cooper, the anonymous mother, a momma, or the beseeching mother. While Theresa’s letter begins and ends with deferent appeals, throughout the letter she moves from deference to assertion and back again both between and within sentences. The letter begins with a statement that introduces Theresa and her circumstances: “I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage.” The beginning of this statement is quite deferent, as “I am a poor woman” illustrates Theresa’s economic vulnerability and implies the potential moral vulnerability that may accompany it. This deference continues in the second half of the sentence “I have been deceived under the promise of marriage,” a statement that makes two important rhetorical moves. First, it reinforces Theresa’s previously implied moral vulnerability, indicating that she was taken in and potentially consented to pre-marital sex. Second,
statement establishes that someone else—the unnamed man who promised marriage—is responsible for taking advantage of that vulnerability. Theresa appeals here to a notion of respectability based on intent, or the argument that her decisions were respectable. She wanted, her letter implies, to marry and to have legitimate children. It was the disreputable intensions and decisions of her former lover that created the circumstances in which Theresa now lives. The letter’s first sentence thus begins with deference in which Theresa establishes perceived economic and moral weakness, but ends more assertively as Theresa implies that this weakness may be the fault of her seducer rather than her own lack of respectability.

This simultaneity of deference and assertion—or of weakness and innocence—continues in the letter’s second sentence. Theresa writes, “I am at present with no means and with out any relatives to nurse my Baby.” The statement again expresses economic vulnerability, indicating that not only is Theresa poor, but that she is without help. However, this statement of deferent vulnerability begins with a slight assertion: “at present.” Theresa does not indicate that she has always been or will always be economically vulnerable, morally vulnerable, or alone. She simply is at present. Her assertion perhaps echoes back to Catholic attitudes about charity and poverty discussed in chapter two.84 While Protestant charities viewed poverty as a moral shortcoming that resulted from immoral, disreputable decisions on behalf of the poor—particularly the Catholic poor—they did note that sometimes poverty arises out of uncontrollable events that are not primarily the fault of the individual such as sickness, injury, or the loss of a job. Similarly, Catholic charities often viewed poverty as a fact of life or as a symptom of a broken social system rather than as a mark of immorality (Fitzgerald Habits of Compassion).

Theresa, in characterizing her circumstances, seem to balance deference and assertion in order to

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84 Please see chapter two, section 2.2.2 for a full discussion of Catholic and Protestant approaches to charity and poverty.
identify herself as this sort of poor person, as the sort of poor person whose circumstances are a result of someone else’s decisions or of a social system rather than of her own failings. In this first rhetorical move—identifying her circumstances—Theresa begins to argue for her own respectability and to make the case that her fall—as her situation may be perceived by others—is not the fault of her own failings while still using to that fall in order to create sympathy.

The letter’s second rhetorical move is similarly patterned. After explaining that she is without relatives to help with the baby, Theresa requests that the child be admitted to the Foundling Asylum: “Therefore I beg you for god sake to take my child.” The request marker “beg” emphasizes Theresa’s deferece to the Sisters; to “beg” is an action that implies a power imbalance, as it is not common to describe as begging a request made to someone of lesser power. However, the deferece implied by “beg” is somewhat mitigated by the phrase “for god sake.” Stating that the Sisters are caring for the baby “for god sake” asserts the Sisters’ religious duty to do so. Further, invoking God changes the power imbalance between Theresa and the Sisters. Rather than a situation in which Theresa is inferior to the Sisters, Theresa composes—though she does so subtly—a situation in which the Sisters are inferior to God, who would want the Sisters to care for Theresa’s baby. Rather than a power relationship between just the Sisters and Theresa, she creates a relationship between the Sisters, Theresa, and God; both Theresa and the Sisters are inferior to God, allowing Theresa to imply a kind of equality between herself and the Sisters. In other words, Theresa establishes and mitigates her inferiority, as she asserts the Sisters’ religious duty while she begs them to fulfill it. Theresa’s assertion continues in the second half of the sentence: “Therefore I beg you for god sake to take my child; until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself.” Here, Theresa emphasizes the temporary nature of her child’s stay at the Foundling Asylum and of her economic vulnerably.
In other words, Theresa argues that the situation that would deem her as not respectable is temporary, asserting her respectability. Theresa does not seem to doubt her ability to “find a situation and have enough means so I can bring myself up” and thus remedy her economic vulnerability. Even though her current disreputable situation is the fault of others, Theresa composes for herself the agency to improve her situation and by extension her respectability. She will “bring up” herself and then return to claim her child.

The letter’s final sentence continues this assertive pattern as Theresa repeats her request that her child be admitted to the Foundling Asylum. Theresa writes, “I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray god for you.” This request is not nearly as deferent as the first time that Theresa asked that her child receive the Sisters’ care. Rather than begging that the Sisters care for her child, Theresa “hopes” that they will do so. Hope is a much more moderate request marker, a moderation that is matched in the remainder of the request. “I hope that you will so kind to accept my child” is in fact a request, but it is phrased as an expectation rather than as a question. Such phrasing is an indirect request marker often used to mitigate the assertion of a request by grammatically softening it (Sonmez). Thus, after asserting her respectability in the previous sentence, Theresa pulls back a bit to restate her request, a moderation that continues in the remainder of the sentence. In vowing to “pray god for” the Sisters, Theresa implies that she is respectable enough to pray to God and that her prayers would be valuable to the Sisters in some way. This reference can be read similarly to Theresa’s previous invocation of God’s name. Rather than the power relationship including only Theresa and the Sisters, it now includes God as well, which equalizes somewhat the relationship between Theresa and the Sisters. Theresa can pray for the Sisters in the same way that they might pray for her, and God will hear them both.
Thus, the body of the letter ends with a couched assertion of her respectability, noting that she is respectable enough for the Sisters to desire her prayers or consider them a worthy reward.

The overall letter concludes with a deferent signature, a sudden shift from the assertion in the letter’s body. Theresa closes her letter with the sentiment “I remain humble servant,” the same sentiment with which the beseeching mother began her letter; however, there are some key differences between Theresa’s use of the term and the beseeching mother’s. Theresa states that she remains a humble servant, but she does not include a pronoun that specifies who she serves. She could be a humble servant of the Sisters like the beseeching mother, but she could also be a humble servant of God alone. It is also important to remember that the designation “humble servant” was a commonly used trope of the period. While the denotative definitions of the words “humble” and “servant” denote the author’s inferiority to the addressee, the phrase has several connotative definitions that undermine this inferiority. The phrase was, for example, often used to lampoon or to overexaggerate deference for effect, a reading that cannot be ignored and may even be reinforced by Theresa’s missing pronoun.

Although Theresa’s identification of herself as a “humble servant” at least implies deference, her decision to include her full name does not. Using her full name “Theresa Perazzo” reinforces Theresa’s assertion of her respectability in two ways. First, it gives a name to her use of first-person pronouns throughout the letter. It is common in the Foundling Letters studied for this dissertation, as well as in the remaining 220 included in the 1000-corpus archived by the New York Historical society, for Foundling mothers to vacillate between first and third person when referring to themselves. Theresa is one of eight mothers in this dissertation’s 17-letter sample to use exclusively first-person pronouns. Further, of those eight, Theresa is one

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85 The remaining nine letters in the sample either 1) use a mix of first- and third-person pronouns when referring to themselves or 2) avoid using pronouns altogether in talking about themselves. For example, The General Grant
of only two mothers to use her name. The use of both her full name and the first-person pronouns reinforces her assertion that she is still respectable and that she will “bring herself up.” She claims for herself both her innocence and her respectability. Second, Theresa’s use of her full name reads as a kind of confidence or even defiance. One of the primary reasons that the Foundling Asylum did not record mothers’ names was to protect their social and economic future. Theresa does not seek out the anonymity of this protection as did so many of her peers, perhaps because she feels confident in her assertion of her respectability.

5.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have presented three case studies in which Foundling mothers—the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper, and Theresa Perazzo—balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to argue for their respectability and worth as women. Respectability, however, is a complicated concept, as each Foundling mother bases her respectability on different aspects of the term. The anonymous mother defines respectability according to her profession, as she balances deference and assertion by creating a partnership with the Sisters in which they become responsible for helping her maintain her respectability and keeping her out of prostitution. Mrs. Cooper bases her argument for her respectability on the legitimacy of her son Walter, as she balances deference and assertion in order to argue that she is a victim of circumstances beyond her control; she explains, in other words, that her decisions were respectable and that the disreputable decisions of others, specifically her husband, are to

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mother—so named because she left a “General Grant our next President” badge with her letter as a token—writes “These tow Dollars is to have this child chrisan Willie do not be afraid of the sores on it face it is nothing but a ringworm you will remember this bage.”

The other six mothers in the sample to use exclusively first-person pronouns left their letters unsigned. Minnie Smith, the other mother to use only first-person pronouns and to sign her full name, left a rather terse note with her child: “Sister I will give my child to you that I never will have back again.”
blame for her circumstances. Finally, Theresa Perazzo makes a similar argument, balancing
defference and assertion in order to explain that her intentions were respectable and that her
vulnerability, which was taken advantage of by her seducer, is only temporary. When viewed
together, these case studies illustrate several conclusions about respectability and about how the
Foundling mothers use rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion.

*Although I have discussed maternity and respectability in separate chapters, they are difficult to parse within the Foundling Letters because 1) the mothers assert the two simultaneously and 2) for Victorian women, being a good mother was part of being a respectable woman.* This dissertation discusses maternity and respectability in separate chapters; however, within the Foundling Letters themselves, the two concepts are very much intertwined. The Foundling mothers argue for their maternity and respectability simultaneously, and many of the mothers’ rhetorical moves can be read as both. For example, the anonymous mother promises to “bring it [her son Joseph] clothes as often as my means allow, This is no idle promise good sister I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty.” This promise can be read as an assertion of her maternity in which she outlines what her continued role as Joseph’s mother will look like; however, the statement can also be read as asserting her respectability, as she distances herself from dishonest, uncaring fallen women. Thus, although I did not discuss maternity extensively in this chapter, the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper, and Theresa Perazzo do all argue for their maternity. One reason for this simultaneity of maternity and respectability may be that, for Victorian women, being a good mother was part of being a respectable woman. While both Protestant and Catholic churches valued virginity, once a woman had taken the role of a mother, fulfilling the expectations of that role were integral to her social respectability and her feminine identity (Welter; Dye and Smith; Fitzgerald *Habits of Compassion*).
Respectability is a complex, multi-faceted, socially-constructed concept, and in arguing their respectability, different Foundling mothers emphasize different aspects of this concept. In their letters, they compose varying definitions of respectability and then illustrate that they fulfill those definitions. Mrs. Cooper, for example, places a great deal of emphasis on the legitimacy of her four children and asserts that this legitimacy marks her as respectable. In contrast, the anonymous mother grounds her assertion of respectability in the fact that she is not a prostitute, that she has not yet succumbed to the fate of the typical fallen woman. She does not mention whether her son Joseph is legitimate, implying that he may not be and that a definition of respectability that includes legitimacy would undermine her argument. Both Mrs. Cooper and Theresa Perazzo emphasize intent in their definitions of respectability, arguing that their choices were respectable ones and that they should not have to bear the burden of the disreputable choices made by others, particularly by men. The fact that, in arguing intent, both Mrs. Cooper and Theresa Perazzo point to the disreputable behavior of men is potentially not a coincidence. The seducer, or libertine, or “sexual adventurer” (Ireland 95) who abandons a pregnant woman also has an important part to play as the villain in the narrative of the fallen woman. Thus, casting men as villains may have made Mrs. Cooper’s and Theresa Perazzo’s letters more successful, as doing so further evoked a narrative with which the Sisters of Charity would have been familiar and which took some of the responsibility off of the Foundling mothers. In sum, all three definitions of respectability presented in these case studies imply that the figure of the fallen woman loomed large in the consciousness of the Foundling mothers as each mother 1) illustrates the ways in which she does not resemble certain aspects of the fallen woman and 2) creates a version of the respectable woman that she can fulfill.
Many Foundling mothers argue for their respectability by deferring to qualities that may illustrate a lack of respectability in order to generate sympathy and then asserting that they possess other qualities that can be described as respectable. This balance of deference and assertion is particularly sophisticated. Theresa Perazzo, for example, defers by acknowledging that she has been “deceived under the promise of marriage,” identifying her own moral vulnerability; however, in the same breath, she asserts that her intentions in consenting to pre-marital sex were respectable, as it was not her plan to end up deserted. Theresa, in other words, invokes her deception in order to illustrate why her child needs the Sisters’ help, but she then asserts against its corresponding vulnerability in arguing for her respectability. This duality exemplifies the ways in which the Foundling mothers’ two common rhetorical goals—securing care for their children and arguing for their maternity and respectability—may be cross purposes that require them to carefully balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion.

While each of the Foundling mothers address both maternity and respectability, they do so with varying emphases. For example, the anonymous mother and Mrs. Cooper both emphasize their maternity to much greater degrees than does Theresa Perazzo. Although Theresa’s maternity is not absent from her letter—she does, for example, use possessive pronouns to linguistically claim her baby—she focuses much more of her rhetorical attention on her respectability.

Finally, the degrees to which the Foundling mothers defer and assert vary both between and within the letters. Each of the mothers analyzed in this chapter both defer and assert; however, they do so to varying degrees. Mrs. Cooper, for example, is much more deferent than are the anonymous mother or Theresa Perazzo. She is not, however, consistently deferent to the same degree throughout her letter. Sometimes, such as when she describes Walter in her
opening lines—"a little boy he is a month old to morrow it father will not do anything and it is a poor little boy it mother has to work to keep 3 others”—Mrs. Cooper is very deferent. Other times, such as when she requests that Walter be christened, she is still deferent, but not the same degree. The variance in deference and assertion may be tied to both 1) which of the common rhetorical goals the Foundling mother is working to accomplish at the moment and 2) the level of rhetorical performance inherent in those goals and in the use of deference and assertion as rhetorical strategies.

In this chapter, as well as in the previous chapter, I have presented case studies that illustrate the ways in which the Foundling mothers balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to 1) secure care for their children and 2) argue for their worth as mothers and as respectable women. In the next chapter, the dissertation’s conclusion, I review these case studies—as well as my analysis of the entire 17-letter sample in chapter three—in order to identify the conclusions that can be drawn from my analysis of the Foundling Letters as a whole. Then, I posit the implications that these conclusions have for the field of Rhetoric and Composition and identify areas of future research for which this dissertation can serve as a foundation.
CHAPTER SIX

“I WOULD NOT PART WITH IT IF I COULD”: REFLECTING ON THE FOUNDLING LETTERS

6.1 Introduction and Reflection

On February 21, 1871, Mrs. Cooper surrendered her infant son Walter to the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity of New York City along with a note in which, begging that Walter be cared for, she explained her circumstances. She is a single mother of four, abandoned by her husband, who cannot care for an infant and still earn enough money to support her older children. And so she surrenders Walter, uncertain whether she will ever see him again.

On September 24, 2015, I serendipitously discovered Mrs. Cooper’s letter on a blog called Letters of Note. Searching the blog for potential case study artifacts, I clicked through letters from famous authors, from historical figures, from athletes, from astronauts, and from other notable men and women for more than an hour before I was suddenly confronted by Mrs. Cooper. I was immediately moved by her letter, but upon repeated readings, I also began to see a pattern in the way that Mrs. Cooper simultaneously asserts herself as a mother and distances herself from that role. The links on Letters of Note led me to the New York Historical Society’s Flickr feed and, later, to the remaining Foundling Letters. There began a three-year project that started with an eight-page case study and evolved into this dissertation.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the Foundling mothers use their letters to fulfill two common rhetorical goals: 1) to secure care for their infant children and 2) to argue for their worth as mothers and as respectable women. The primary strategy the Foundling mothers use to do so is the dynamic balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion. Rhetorical

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87 http://www.lettersofnote.com/
strategies of deference appeal to perceived gender, racial, cultural, religious, moral, and/or social inferiority (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Sonmez; Wall; Whyman; Milne; Tebeaux and Lay), while rhetorical strategies of assertion refute such inferiority or appeal to equality. In balancing deference and assertion, the Foundling mothers are able to simultaneously beg for their children’s care and to assert their maternity and respectability, a rhetorical strategy that I analyze across this dissertation’s six chapters. In chapter one, I outlined the project, providing an overview of the tripartite lens that I use to analyze the Foundling Letters: economic and social conditions encountered by the Foundling mothers, scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion, and theories of everyday writing. Chapter two focused on the Foundling Letters as historical, material, and everyday artifacts. To represent the letters as historical artifacts and to provide context for my analysis, I narrated the economic and social realities faced by poor, single, working mothers in late-19th century New York City. Then, to identify the letters as material artifacts, I outlined the manner in which the Foundling Letters are archived at the New York Historical Society (NYHS) and explained the criteria for selection in this dissertation’s sample. Finally, I explored the letters as artifacts of everyday writing, explaining the ways in which the key concepts of everyday writing theory—particularly power relationships, boundaries between domains of composition, and authorial agency— influenced my analysis of the Foundling Letters.

Chapter three was dedicated to an examination of the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion used by the Founding mothers. First, I interrogated deference and assertion as rhetorical concepts, explaining that rhetorical strategies of deference appeal to a perceived inferiority and focusing on the ways that gender and class influence such strategies. Then, I analyzed as a unit the 17 letters included in this dissertation’s sample, identifying and explaining
the rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion common among the entire sample of Foundling Letters. After examining these common strategies individually in chapter three, chapters four and five built on that analysis, presenting case studies that illustrated how the Foundling mothers use these strategies dynamically in the context of their letters. More specifically, chapter four presented three case studies—those of the beseeching mother, the anonymous mother, and a momma—that illustrate how the Foundling mothers dynamically balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in order to compose roles for themselves as mothers. Then, chapter five presented three additional case studies—those of the anonymous mother, Mrs. Cooper, and Theresa Perazzo—that illustrate how the Foundling mothers use deference and assertion to argue for their respectability as women. Here, in chapter six, I will review the conclusions and implications of my analysis and, finally, offer directions for future research.

6.2 Conclusions

My analysis of the Foundling Letters presents a series of conclusions that I review below. These conclusions illustrate the rhetorical sophistication of the Foundling Letters and illuminate the complex ways in which the Foundling mothers fulfill their rhetorical goals. Further, they speak to the questions that this project sought to explore: 1) what are the rhetorical and linguistic moves used by the Foundling mothers?; 2) what role does assertion play in deference?; 3) how does the dynamic movement between deference and assertion function as a rhetorical strategy?; and 4) what can the Foundling Letters, as a corpus, tell us about how women use writing in their everyday lives? These were, of course, the questions I took up as I began the project: in pursuing it, however, as discussed below, I found that my conclusions answer those questions in
ways more nuanced than initially imagined, which speaks to the complexity of the questions, to the complexity of the Foundling Letters themselves, and to complex interrelationships of questions and conclusions, with each conclusion responding, at least minimally, to each research question.

*The degree to which the Foundling mothers defer and assert varies both between and within letters.* One of the more difficult aspects of the Foundling Letters to quantify is the variance in the degree of deference and assertion used by the Foundling mothers. This analysis has been based in finding patterns among the individual Foundling mothers’ uses of rhetoric. One of those patterns has been the variance in the degree to which each Foundling mother defers and asserts. As illustrated by the case studies in chapters four and five, some Foundling mothers are more deferent than others. The beseeching mother, for example, is far more deferent than the anonymous mother, who is herself more deferent than a momma or Theresa Perazzo. In other words, while all of the Foundling mothers defer and assert, they do so to differing degrees. As much as the Foundling mother’s degree of deference and assertion varies between letters, it also varies between within letters. The best example of this is the beseeching mother, whose letter begins deferentially but becomes increasingly assertive as her argument progresses. At the end of her letter, she is still deferent, but not nearly as deferent as in the letter’s opening lines. In other words, while all of the letters can be described as both deferent and assertive, the Foundling mothers respond to different situations with different levels of deference and assertion, so that each Foundling mother composes a unique relationship between the two. Deference and assertion here can be characterized as operating on a kind of spectrum. None of the Foundling mothers in this dissertation’s 17-letter sample is entirely deferent or entirely assertive; instead they lie somewhere on a spectrum of deference.
The Foundling mothers’ emphasis on maternity and respectability and on securing care is echoed in their relative degree of deference and assertion. There seems to be some degree of connection between the rhetorical goal that a mother emphasizes and her degree of deference and assertion. When the Foundling mothers argue for their maternity and respectability, they tend to become more assertive. When arguing that their children deserve to be admitted into the Foundling Asylum, mothers tend to become more deferent. In other words, the Foundling mothers may need to balance rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion because they also need to balance multiple rhetorical goals. In securing care for their children, the Foundling mothers rely on rhetorical strategies of deference, often characterizing themselves as weak or vulnerable; however, appealing to perceived inferiority then creates need to assert that, despite this inferiority and vulnerability, they are still good, respectable women and mothers. This assertion undercuts the vulnerability needed to secure care and so the cycle continues. Thus, the letters are organized as a series dynamic moves. Securing care requires a degree of deference; however, deferring then creates the need to assert and vice versa.

All of the Foundling mothers (1) argue for their maternity, (2) assert their respectability, and (3) work to secure care for their children; however, they tend to emphasize one of these rhetorical goals more than the others\(^88\). Some Foundling mothers, in other words, focus more on securing care for their children than on arguing for their maternity and respectability. For example, a Foundling mother who signs her letter “His Mother” left a brief note in which she focuses on the care of her unnamed son: “Please wash his eyes out with a soft cloth and a little warm water and if you do they will soon be well.” His Mother, in this case, focuses on ensuring that her child and his infected eyes receive the care they need. Other Foundling mothers, such as

\(^88\) The Foundling mothers also have rhetorical goals that may be unique to them as individuals; however, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on these major rhetorical goals that they all share.
a momma, focus primarily on maternity. A momma uses passive voice to remove herself almost entirely from her letter in order to focus on her son Willie. In other words, she spends her letter composing a role for herself as Willie’s mother rather than asserting her own social respectability. Still other Foundling mothers balance their focus, moving between arguing for care, asserting motherhood, and asserting respectability in turns and sometimes simultaneously. Mrs. Cooper, for example, has sections of her letter in which she primarily focuses on each of the three, moving between sections in which she argues for care, in which she asserts maternity, and in which she asserts respectability. For example, in the opening lines of her letter, Mrs. Cooper focuses on securing care for Walter, making minor arguments for her maternity and respectability. In the section of the letter in which she explains that she had to leave her husband, who was a “bad man,” for the safety of her children, Mrs. Cooper simultaneously argues that she is a respectable woman because her children are legitimate and asserts her maternity by arguing that she is a good mother; her argument that Walter needs the Sisters’ help receives considerably less focus here than it did in the letter’s opening lines. In sum, although the Foundling mothers share common rhetorical goals, those goals do not receive equal emphasis within or between letters.

*The Foundling mothers employ a similar set of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion; however, these strategies are combined in unique ways.* As illustrated in chapter three, the Foundling mothers use several similar strategies of deference and assertion. For example, many of the Foundling mothers assert their maternity by using possessive pronouns to linguistically claim their children—“my baby,” for example—or by signing their letters with some form of the word ‘mother’—“His Mother,” “Its Mother,” “a momma.” Many Foundling mothers—12 of the 17 mothers analyzed in this dissertation—defer by framing themselves as
physically, emotionally, economically, and/or morally weak, the most commonly used strategy in the letters. However, the Foundling mothers combine these strategies in unique ways to produce individual primary rhetorical strategies. For example, the beseeching mother’s primary rhetorical strategy is couching, but the types of assertive appeals she couches and the deferent appeals she couches them with are all found in other Foundling Letters. It is the beseeching mother’s combination of those appeals that makes her letter unique. The same can be said of the other Foundling mothers in this dissertation’s sample, who combine common rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion into unique primary strategies.

Although the Foundling mothers may not directly mention gender, it plays a significant role in their use of deference. Scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference emphasizes that every aspect of deference—how authors defer, who they defer to—is gendered. James Daybell goes so far as to label deference a feminine rhetorical strategy, even as he acknowledges that both male and female Early Modern authors utilize deference as a rhetorical strategy (4). Many instances of deference analyzed by Daybell and other scholars involve women deferring to men by appealing to the trope of the weak, helpless, vulnerable woman (Daybell; Fitzpatrick; Wall; Whyman; Sonmez). When women defer to each other, however, they slightly subvert this trope; women still describe themselves as weak, as helpless, and as vulnerable, but that weakness is not implied to be inherent in their genders. This subversion can be seen in the Foundling Letters. In deferring to the Sisters of Charity, a group of women, Foundling mothers often characterize themselves as vulnerable because of their economic and social context, not because weakness is an inherent quality of their female bodies. Still, gender is not absent from their appeals. Theresa Perazzo, for example, writes that she was “deceived under the promise of marriage”: likewise, the poor lame girl—so named because this is how she describes herself in the opening lines of
her letter—writes that “the father of it [her son Charles] gone away what i don’t no where.”

Both Theresa and the poor lame girl are vulnerable because they have been abandoned by men, because they have borne infants who need care, because they struggle to find work, and because they bear the social burden of their actions, all of which is made more difficult by their gender. Thus, although the Foundling mothers’ deference is not gendered in that it does not imply that the Foundling mothers’ vulnerability is an inherent result of their gender, their deference nonetheless appeals to the ways in which their gender, within the society in which they live, makes them more vulnerable than men.

_The Foundling mothers primarily argue their maternity in two ways: 1) asserting that they remain their children’s mothers despite surrendering physical custody to the Foundling Asylum and 2) composing a continuing role in their children’s lives at the Foundling Asylum._

Maternity is a complex, socially constructed concept, but the Foundling mothers assert their maternity two specific ways. First, they work to establish that they will remain their children’s mothers. In doing so, the Foundling mothers create a maternity that is focused on care as much as biology or custody, the second of the two ways in which Foundling mothers assert their maternity. Foundling mothers who surrendered their children were unlikely to see them again, so they use their letters to argue that they will still provide care for their children even if they cannot retain physical custody. For example, the anonymous mother writes that she will “place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and…bring it clothes as often as my means will allow.” Such promises are common among the Foundling Letters, as mothers outline a continued relationship with their children by promising continued financial or material care. Other Foundling mothers, like Mrs. Cooper and a momma, write that they will at some undetermined point in the future return for their children (though in reality few mothers
ever did retake custody of their children). Making this claim casts their loss of the children as temporary and creates a way for them to remain mothers. In other words, the Foundling mothers assert their maternity based on the aspects of motherhood that they will continue to fulfill.

*The Foundling mother’s assertions of maternity are complicated by the linguistic distances they create between themselves, their children, and their roles as mothers.* Although the Foundling mothers work hard to compose continued roles for themselves as mothers, there are still moments in their letters where they distance themselves from those roles. Mrs. Cooper presents the clearest example of this. When Mrs. Cooper states that she cannot keep her son Walter and asks that he be cared for by the Sisters, she uses third person to describe herself, explaining that “it mother…. cannot do anything with” him rather than that ‘I cannot do anything with’ him. However, when discussing her own respectability, Mrs. Cooper uses first person: “I married respectfully and I did not think my husband was a bad man.” In other words. Mrs. Cooper creates linguistic distance between herself and her maternal role but not between herself and her respectability. This pattern is common throughout the Foundling Letters.

*Respectability is also a complex, socially constructed concept, and, in asserting their respectability, Foundling mothers select different aspects of respectability to emphasize.* Victorian social respectability includes multiple dimensions—sexuality, religion, poverty, morality, intent—and, in arguing for their respectability, the Foundling mothers focus on the dimension that they most readily fulfill, much as they do in arguing for their maternity. For example, Mrs. Cooper’s argument for her respectability hinges on her son Walter’s legitimacy and her lack of culpability in her husband’s badness. In contrast, the anonymous mother does not mention her son Joseph’s parentage at all, implying that Joseph is not legitimate. Instead, the anonymous mother focuses on her poverty, noting that she is respectable in the sense that she
had not yet turned to prostitution. Both Foundling mothers, in other words, emphasize different elements of respectability, creating varying definitions of the term based on the dimension of respectability they can most clearly demonstrate that they fulfill.

In sum, the conclusions outlined above illustrate the complexity of the Foundling mothers’ balance of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion and point to a number of implications for the field.

6.3 Implications and Limitations

While my analysis of the Foundling Letters has many implications for the field of Rhetoric and Composition, I focus here on two broad implications: the more nuanced view of deference and assertion illustrated by my analysis and the method provided for the study of archived everyday writing.

My analysis of the Foundling Letters provides a more nuanced view of deference and assertion as rhetorical strategies. Scholarship on rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion tends to approach the two as contrasting strategies; some letters are deferent, and others are assertive. The Foundling Letters, however, illustrate the ways in which deference and assertion can function as complementary strategies. The Foundling mothers balance the two dynamically, using this balance to simultaneously fulfill seemingly opposed rhetorical goals: securing care for their children and asserting their maternity and respectability. Further, my analysis of the Foundling Letters illustrates variance in the degrees of deference and assertion used, indicating that that deference and assertion might be better conceptualized as two points on a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy. Deference and assertion have been cited as significant rhetorical
strategies in women’s writing throughout history, and this dissertation provides a more nuanced view of these strategies.

This more nuanced view of deference and assertion provides the concepts with a potentially wider value for writing studies by reimagining rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion as a framework for studying the often invisible writing of women, working-class people, and people of color. In this dissertation, I have placed rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion in conversation with theories of everyday writing. In doing so, I make a connection between 1) the ways in which everyday writing theory emphasizes the agency of non-elite authors and assumes the value of ephemeral, sometimes invisible writing and 2) the ways in which rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion are predicated on an unequal power relationship between author and audience. This connection reframes deference and assertion as a framework for identifying and analyzing the rhetorical sophistication of populations whose writing is often undervalued or ignored either because the genre of writing is undervalued—often because of its connection to domesticity or everyday life—or because a population—such as women, working-class people, and people of color—is presumed to have low levels of literacy and/or agency.

In addition to including its more nuanced view of deference and assertion that can serve as a conceptual framework, this dissertation offers methods for the study of everyday writing, particularly archived everyday writing, that may be of use to future scholars. The Foundling Letters present a somewhat unique situation, as they are archived in two, interlocking groups. First is the full 1000-letter corpus that was compiled into five scrapbooks by the Foundling Asylum staff and is currently housed in the New York Historical Society physical archive. The scrapbooks can only be accessed at the NYHS reading room in Manhattan. Second is the
digitized letters, 31 letters drawn from that 1000-letter corpus that have been digitized and posted to the NYHS Flickr feed. Much of this dissertation’s method of analysis stemmed from the need to work simultaneously in these two different types of archival spaces.

The first step of the process was to create a taxonomy that divided the 1000-letter corpus into types. When visiting the NHYS to view the scrapbooks, I was confronted with a mass of letters that needed some kind of organization in order for me to move forward with the project. As discussed in chapter two, the letters are not individually archived, and, as such, do not have individual metadata. With this complication in mind, I read through the scrapbooks over a three-day period (reading and making notes about each of the 1000 letters) and looked for similarities, eventually identifying patterns in authorship, length, gender, and rhetorical goals. From these patterns, I created a taxonomy that organized the letters into six types: mothers’ letters, mothers’ notes, fathers’ letters, short notes, letters of recommendation and introduction, and custody letters. With the taxonomy established, I was able to place the mothers’ letters and notes among a network of letters, focusing specifically on what made them unique from letters written by other parties involved in the children’s lives.

The second step in working across physical and digital archival spaces was figuring out how I could actually use the mothers’ letters and notes not included in the dissertation’s sample. Because this dissertation’s sample was drawn from the digitized letters only, I decided to use the full corpus as context to allow me to better identify patterns that were not as clear in the 17-letter sample. For example, although only one letter in the sample used the phrase “hart broken mother,” the phrase is much more prevalent in the entire corpus, allowing me to identify a pattern that may not have been visible in the 17-letter sample alone.

89 For a review of reasons why the sample was selected from the digitized letters, please see chapter two, section 2.3.2.
I hope that this method of working with archived everyday writing will be helpful to future scholars. As archives continue to use social media such as Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram to advertise their collections and as archives partially digitize their collections on their own sites, future scholars—and particularly graduate students like myself who are working with limited resources—may need to work in physical and digital archives simultaneously.

The method used to analyze the Foundling Letters is also the source of this dissertation’s limitations. The nature of and unique relationship between the interlocking groups of Foundling Letters—the 1000-letter corpus, the 31 digitized letters, and this dissertation’s 17-letter sample—have resulted in some limitations; however, in designing this study, I approached these limitations as elements of the nature of the Foundling Letters rather than as problems.

Perhaps the most significant limitation in this study is that the digitized letters from which the 17-letter sample was drawn are a sample of convenience. The 31 letters were chosen for digitization with no specific criteria; the NYHS’ goal was to choose letters that would publicize the collection in the press, not to choose letters that would form the basis of a study. Even still, I took a number of steps to approach this sample of convenience as a feature of the Foundling Letters rather than solely as a limitation. First, I used the 1000-letter corpus to provide context, as knowledge of those letters allowed me to identify whether patterns that I saw in the 17-letter sample were also present in the 1000-letter corpus. Second, I provided a rich contextual background in the form of three stories—those of single, working mothers in Victorian New York City, of the Foundling Asylum as an institution, and of the Foundling mothers as individuals—that narrated some of the background missing in the letters themselves. Another challenging aspect of the Foundling Letters was the lack of background information about the mothers themselves. To address this, I used historical research to recreate a common rhetorical
situation for the Foundling mothers. Moreover, one of the benefits of drawing my sample from the 31 digitized letters was that I was left with a sample that is accessible to anyone, making it easy for future scholars to examine my methods.

A second limitation of this study lies in the method in which the Foundling Letters were archived. Some time prior to the acquisition of the Foundling Hospital Collection by the NYHS in 2009, the Foundling Letters were compiled into five scrapbooks by Foundling Asylum staff. In doing so, they pasted the letters into the scrapbook pages, obscuring any writing on the back side of the letter. This means that many letters are no longer viewable in their entirety. I am very disappointed by this—as are the NYHS archivists—as there are several mothers’ letters that I cannot view that may have enriched my analysis. This is, however, a limitation that is simply part of the nature of the artifacts.

A third limitation of this study is that the letters are limited to a single site, meaning that the conclusions drawn based on the Foundling Letters are specific to that set of letters. Still, this also represents a direction for future research as much as a limitation. There are similar collections of letters that have been archived for the Protestant Infant Asylum (a collection that is also housed at the New York Historical Society), at the Foundling Hospital in London, and in foundling homes in many major US cities. Thus, although the results of this dissertation may not be completely generalizable, they do represent a foundation upon which much can be built.

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90 The scrapbooks were probably compiled much earlier than 2009, given that the transcripts were written on a typewriter. Newspaper articles covering the Foundling’s 90th anniversary in 1959 (which was also the year that they moved into a new building after leaving the large compound they had inhabited since 1873) indicate that the celebration included the display of letters dating back to the institution’s founding (“Foundling Hospital Marks”). It seems likely that the scrapbooks were created in 1959 for this purpose.
6.4 Directions for Future Research

Although this chapter marks the completion of this dissertation, there is still work to be done with the Foundling Letters. In particular, there are four areas of future research for which this dissertation provides a foundation. First, this dissertation’s implications point to the need to study in more detail the writing of working-class women, as well as to reconsider how women whose letters have been previously studied have employed deference and assertion as rhetorical strategies. As discussed above, this dissertation’s conceptualization of rhetorical strategies of deference and assertion provides a framework for doing so. Second, there is more to study in terms of the Foundling Letters themselves. This dissertation analyzed 17 of approximately 240 mothers’ letters and notes. The remaining mothers’ letters and notes in the scrapbooks similarly deserve closer study. Further, the fathers’ letters, short notes, and letters of recommendation and introduction also remain to be studied. Third, my experience in researching letters that are simultaneously digitally and physically archived provides an opportunity to consider how the combination of both spaces influences engagement with the archives, particularly considering that more and more archives are using digital media tools to publicize their collections. Fourth, this dissertation provides a foundation for considering more fully how working-class women used writing in their everyday lives. My intent, when I began this project two years ago, was to use the Foundling Letters to make a claim about the relationship between everyday writing and working-class women, a potential claim that inspired this project’s final research question: what can the Foundling Letters, as a corpus, tell us about how women use writing in their everyday lives? This project gestures toward an answer to that question, offering a foundation upon which and a method with which a larger project can be built.
The Foundling mothers, as single, working mothers, display remarkable rhetorical sophistication in balancing strategies of deference and assertion in order to secure care for their children and to argue for their worth as mothers and respectable women in a social context that would deny them both. Their letters are affecting, as they showcase desperation, maternal love, and anger. The letters become even more heartbreaking when history illustrates that most of the Founding mothers never saw their children again and that most of the children didn’t live beyond their first year.

As the daughter of a mother who was also once young, abandoned, and poor, I was drawn to the Foundling Letters for many reasons, but most importantly for the opportunity to find agency in this group of women who reminded me so much of the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and friends around whom I grew up: women whose agency and literacy, like that of the Foundling mothers, was infrequently acknowledged or valued, even though I knew them to be strong, purposeful, effective composers. The Foundling Letter project also revealed a remarkable group of women in the Sisters of Charity, an order of teachers and nurses, who, under the direction of the remarkable Sister Mary Irene, turned five dollars into one of the largest charities in New York City (one that is still operating 150 years later) and saved the lives of thousands of children.

The story of the Foundling mothers and the Foundling Asylum is not always a happy story. Women and children lost their lives, there were not enough resources to provide all of the living children with the loving homes they deserved, and children of color were not always well
treated. However, the story of the Foundling mothers and of the Foundling Asylum is also story
about strong, intelligent, powerful women working against a society that devalued them and
using rhetoric to help each other.
APPENDIX A

THE 17-LETTER SAMPLE

The hart broken mother

Born the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of Oct christened by father everet the babys name is John Larkin I will do all I can towards the support I am his hart Broken mother but I hope I can have him some time if not hear in heavin I hope

\[1345\text{ ok}]^{91}

Born the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of Oct christened By father everet the babys name is John Larkin I will do all I can towards the support I am his hart Broken mother but I hope I can have him some time if not hear in heavin I hope

\[91\text{ Markings made by the Foundling Asylum staff are transcribed in brackets.}\]
This little baby is not christened call him Theodore Walters I leave him here because I cannot keep him and I want him brought up a catholic two protestant ladies want him but they cannot bring him up catholic
This tow Dollars is to have this child Chrisan Willie do not be afraid of the sores on it face it is nothing but a ringworm

you will remember this bage [General Grant our next President badge]
The mother who cannot write anymore

Sister Irene
Dear Sisters of Mercy

Please take care of this baby as I can not do it myself. I trust God will reward you. I do not know if I live or die. I give it up in charge of you and the almighty. I have sinned and can not expect good luck. It will not be christened and I know you will attend to that. If I live I hope to claim it someday. Its fathers name Hudson.

You call it as you think best. I am not able to write any more.
I call it Julia R Hudson.
To the sister:

This child will be claimed; as soon as possible; how soon I do now know. But all expenses will be paid in full; so please take the best of care possible to be taken. His name is Willie C. Please do not have the chain + Locket off and let the child have it all the time, so as to be identified; as no mistake must be made as to which child is the one wanted. He was born yesterday.

The 13 of January 1877

A momma
Sister Superioress

I am a poor woman and I have been deceived under the promise of marriage; I am at present with no means and without any relatives to nurse my Baby. Therefore I beg you for god sake to take my child; until I can find a situation and have enough means so I can bring up myself. I hope that you will so kind to accept my child and I will pray god for you.

I remain humble servant

Theresa Perazzo

New York Dec 3rd 1874
New York March 5/77

This is to certify that the undersign has given by her own free will and accord the full charge now and forever her boy Harry Sturges to the Foundling Asylum in charge of Sister Irene as I have know way to provide for it.

Respectfully Yours,

Her

Mary X Sturges
Mark
Sister [March 13, 1877]
I will give my child to you that I will never had back again
[Child’s name James Smith]
Minnie Smith
Please wash his eyes out with a soft cloth and a little warm water and if you do they will soon be well.

His Mother.

[ok 1565]
[Born 12\textsuperscript{th} & College]
Mrs. Cooper

New York tuesday

Kind Sisters,
you will find a little boy he is a month old to morrow it father will not do anything and it is a poor little boy it mother has to work to keep 3 others and can not do anything with this one it name is Walter Cooper and he is not christen yet will you be so good as to do it I should not like him to die with out it his mother might claim him some day I have been married 5 years and I married respectfully and I did not think my husband was a bad man I had to leave him and I could not trust my children to him now I do not know where he is and he has not seen this one yet I have not a dollar in the world to give him or I would give it to him I wish you would keep him for 3 or 4 month and if he is not claimed by that time you may be sure it mother can not support it I may some day send some money to him do not forget his name

Yours Respectfully
Mrs. Cooper
New York Sept 14th 1870

This Babe.

Harry S. Babcock, was born Aug 28th 1870.

I leave it to your tender mercies and care

Please Keep this Record.

From Its Mother
Tuesday, March 1st 1870

to the dear sister of charity

please
take good care of this child as it is the only wish of its mother has she is not able to take care of it and god will Bless you its name is Emma Jane

Born Sunday January 30th 1870 at 11=20 AM and is not christen

[327 ok]
[Oct. 9, 1876]

Please call him Harry Oliver - it being the last request of his mother. He is now intrusted with all his worldly possessions to your tender care.
My dear good sister:

Please accept this little outcast son of mine trusting with Gods help that I will be able to sustain it in your institution. I would not part with my baby were it in any way possible for me, to make a respectable living with it, but I cannot, and so ask you to take my little one, and with the assistance of our Blessed lady I promise to place in the contribution box, each month all that I can spare from my earnings, and to bring it clothes as often as my means will allow. This is no idle promise good sister I know how often such are made and broken, but I will do my duty. It name is Joseph Cavalier.
New York March 4th / 70

Your Humble Servant

Beseeches you kind Sister to be kind to this Baby and may god Reward you it has a noble godfather and its Poor mother is behold-ing to work the last cent in my possession is one Dollar but what I need very bad Please accept of it

The infants name is Mary Dwyre
My Dear Friends  February 5 1872
Would you be kind anove as for to take good care of this baby as i am a poor lame girl and not able to take care of it and the father of it gone away what i don’t no where. the baby is born on the 30th day of November and chrrient on the 8 of December name Charles Sharer. Please take care of this baby and God bless you.
Sister you will please take care of my Baby for I have no way of keeping it. I have to hire out and try to pay for it. I will come and pay as much as I can every month. The Baby is Christen. Its name is Cathrine Betchind. I would not part with it if I could.
REFERENCES


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**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Jennifer Enoch was born in California, but grew up in Arizona and Colorado. She completed her Bachelors in English at Colorado State University-Pueblo in 2006 and her Masters in English at Colorado State University in 2013. In 2018, Jennifer completed a PhD in English specializing in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University. Beginning in fall of 2018, she will be an Assistant Professor of English at Northwestern State University. Jennifer has worked as a teaching assistant in the composition programs at Florida State University, Indiana University-East, and Colorado State University-Pueblo, as well as in Florida State University’s Editing, Writing, and Media program. Her work will soon be published in *Talking Back*, an anthology edited by Norbert Eliot and Alice S. Horning, and in *Teaching Rhetoric and Composition Through the Archives*, an anthology edited by Tarez Samra Graban and Wendy Hayden. Further, Jennifer has presented at CCCC, Feminisms and Rhetorics, and Computers and Writing. When Jennifer is not teaching or writing, she enjoys baking, antiquing, and watching terrible moves.