

WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

A SOURCEBOOK



EDITED BY

HANNAH WILLS, SADIE HARRISON, ERIKA JONES,
FARRAH LAWRENCE-MACKEY AND REBECCA MARTIN

 **UCLPRESS**

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Farrah Lawrence-Mackey and Rebecca Martin

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The Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito (Committee of Ladies of Honour and Merit): Children's parchments in the Madrid Foundling House (1802)

Dr Elena Serrano⁴¹

Introduction

More resistant than paper, these little pieces of parchment (4 cm by 10 cm) were filled in and attached to babies' waists as soon as they were received in the Madrid Foundling House. They worked as children's identity cards – necessary as children drifted from hand to hand. As in many other foundling houses, children only spent a few days in the wards before they were sent to be wet nursed by women who lived in poverty in the surrounding neighbourhoods.⁴² However, children were often returned after only a few weeks and the affair of finding another wet-nurse had to begin again. Wet-nurses needed to show the parchment and the baby at the Foundling House to assure the baby's identity, and to be paid. If the child died, a doctor or a clergyman would write the date of death on the parchment's back, which then had to be returned to the Foundling House. As can be seen in this source, the parchments of deceased children were cut at the corners and in the centre to prevent them being sold on the black-market.

Source



Figure 5.1 Children's parchment used to identify a baby in the Madrid Foundling House, 1802. Image credit: Archivo Regional de la Comunidad de Madrid. Fondo Diputación, Inclusa.

Analysis

By the late eighteenth century, the Madrid Foundling House was receiving around three to four babies a day, approximately a thousand babies a year, which amounted to a quarter of the total number of children born annually in Madrid. Mortality rates were terrifying even for contemporaries: more than 90 per cent of children died during their first month in the care of the House.⁴³ In 1799, a female society, the Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito (Committee of Ladies of Honour and Merit) replaced the previous male committee and took full control of the House's management.⁴⁴ The Junta construed its practices as feminine and enlightened. It touted its own management of the Foundling House as a break from the previous old-fashioned, careless and masculine way of running it. The Junta meticulously ordered the everyday life of the Foundling House, mirroring the ideal ways of ruling domestic households. It specified all the tasks of employees and the daily hygienic chores,

checked the accounting books, ordered the archives and tightly controlled the incomes and expenses of the House. It increased the hygienic medical measures, doubled the medical personnel and controlled the health of wet-nurses. It was especially careful in supervising how babies were treated, issuing rules for the new nuns that the Junta contracted, and involving the local priests to oversee the behaviour of external wet-nurses.

Moreover, in order to correctly calculate mortality rates (the proportion of children that died in relation to the total that were received), and to be able to prove that the new measures were working, the Junta developed a refined system of tracing the entrance and exits of children and their identities.⁴⁵ Children were carefully registered in the legend books in which all of babies' known data, including parents' names, place of birth and the circumstances of their finding were recorded. Babies were also labelled with parchments (as seen in the source image) and placed in numbered cradles during their time in the Foundling House.

The parchments could be considered as mobile elements in a sophisticated system of 'paper tools' or 'paper technologies' that organised the life in the Foundling House.⁴⁶ Parchments functioned in a similar way to library book labels, which linked books to catalogues, so that books could be found, sorted and classified. Likewise, the parchments linked babies with information held in the legend books. As can be seen in this source, in addition to the name and the date the child entered the Foundling House, there were two numbers in the corners. The one in the left corner indicated the number of the legend book in which the baby was registered and the one in the right corner noted the page. For instance, baby Remigio Josef was inscribed in Book 170, which corresponded to year 1802, page 118. In this year, the Junta made a further step: it changed the old system of registering the children that had been set up in the seventeenth century, reunifying in one legend book all the information about the child that had previously been scattered in two. In this way, it claimed, it would be easier to calculate mortality rates weekly, monthly and annually.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Junta was able to quantify the most frequent causes of death and analyse its distribution by age and sex.⁴⁸ The female society also introduced new categories for qualifying the condition in which children arrived and how this might affect their chances of survival.

Eventually the new paper technologies allowed for the creation of medical knowledge. The analysis of parchments, legend books and other notebooks that classified deceased children by age, sex and place of death, and mortality rates lists, demonstrate the ability of women to produce knowledge in places beyond scientific venues.⁴⁹

Questions

1. How would you define ‘paper technologies’ and ‘paper tools’? Can you think of any other eighteenth-century examples? You might consider different fields such as natural history.
2. What role did these parchments play within the wider system of identifying and tracing foundlings?
3. To what extent did paper technologies such as the one used in the Madrid Foundling House enable the production of new knowledge?
4. How did the paper technologies employed in the Madrid Foundling House relate to skills considered at the time necessary in the education of high-class women, such as accounting and housekeeping?
5. The Foundling House was an institution run by women, whereas many scientific academies of the day only permitted men. Might this have had implications for the kinds of knowledge produced, shared, and valued by these places? If so, how?

Further reading

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Part V notes

- 1 Porter, ‘Introduction’, 2003, 1–22.
- 2 McClellan, ‘Scientific Organisations and the Organisation of Science’, 2003, 90–94.
- 3 For an exploration of the role of women within the Royal Institution, see Lloyd, ‘Rulers of Opinion’, 2019.
- 4 For the role of class in enabling women to access spaces of knowledge production within elite society see Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?*, 12.
- 5 Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?*, 10; Goodman, ‘Enlightenment Salons’, 1989, 338.
- 6 The research for this piece has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Project CIRGEN, ERC Grant Agreement No 787015).

- 7 The Spanish Enlightenment is a subject of internal debate within the field and, as has been highlighted within this text, it should be considered critically who is centralised as the source of Enlightenment thought, what the term Enlightenment means and who it includes and excludes when reviewing these sources. For a selection of essays on the various definitions of the Spanish Enlightenment, see Astigarraga, *The Spanish Enlightenment Revisited*.
- 8 López-Cordón, *Condición femenina y razón ilustrada*.
- 9 Amar y Borbón, *Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres*.
- 10 Martínez Vidal and Pardo Tomás, 'Un conflicto profesional, un conflicto moral y un conflicto de género', 2001.
- 11 Lewis, *Women writers in the Spanish Enlightenment*.
- 12 Sullivan, 'Josefa Amar y Borbón and the Royal Aragonese Economic Society (with documents)'; López-Cordón, *Condición femenina y razón ilustrada*.
- 13 Amar y Borbón, 'Discurso en defensa del talento de las mugeres y de su aptitud para el gobierno y otros cargos en que se emplean los hombres'; Facsimile editions in López-Cordón, *Condición femenina y razón ilustrada*; English translation in Barker, *In Defence of Women*.
- 14 Bolufer Peruga, 'New Inflections of a Long Polemic'.
- 15 Fabiani, *Il calamaio sulla finestra*.
- 16 Leonhard Euler (1707–1783), Swiss mathematician.
- 17 Sergei Gerasimovich Domashnev, director of the Academy from 1775 to 1782.
- 18 Nicolas Fuss (1755–1826), Swiss mathematician, trained in Russia by Leonhard Euler.
- 19 Jacob Stählin (1709–1785), German poet, professor of allegory and rhetoric at the academy from 1735.
- 20 The *Commentarii Academiae Scientiarum imp. Petropolitanae* were the academy's scholarly journals, published in Latin since 1728.
- 21 On Dashkova's life see Prince, *The Princess and the Patriot*, and Woronzoff-Dashkoff, 'Dashkova', 2008.
- 22 Woronzoff-Dashkoff, 'Dashkova', 2008, xxiii.
- 23 Gordin, 'Arduous and Delicate Task', discusses her role in the Academy of Sciences.
- 24 Gordin, 'The Importation of Being Earnest', 2010.
- 25 Werrett, 'The Schumacher Affair', 2010.
- 26 Herschel, *Memoir and Correspondence of Caroline Herschel*, v.
- 27 Aquabusade was a lotion, usually containing alcohol, used to clean wounds.
- 28 Available at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rstl.1787.0001> (accessed 14 December 2022).
- 29 The letter is addressed to Charles Blagden, then Secretary of the Royal Society.
- 30 Herschel, *Caroline Herschel's Autobiographies*, I, 63.
- 31 Burney, *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, vol I, 152; 317.
- 32 Herschel is quoted in Winterburn, *The Quiet Revolution of Caroline Herschel*, 268.
- 33 James, 'Making Money from the Royal Navy in the late Eighteenth Century', 2021.
- 34 Walter Scott to John Bacon Sawrey Morritt, 9 August 1810, in H.J.C. Grierson, Ed., *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, London: Constable, 12 volumes, 1932–1937, 2: 368.
- 35 Humphry Davy to Jane Apreece, c.8–12 July 1811, in Fulford et al. *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*, vol. 1: 273.
- 36 Lord Byron to Samuel Rogers, 12 April 1812, in Marchand, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, vol. 11: 180–181.
- 37 Humphry Davy to John Davy, June 1812, in Fulford et al. *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*, vol. 2: 327.
- 38 Joseph Banks to Charles Blagden, 3 October 1816 in Chambers, *The Scientific Correspondence of Joseph Banks*, vol. 6, 217–19.
- 39 For example, see Packer et al., '2308. Robert Southey to Edith Southey, 25 September 1813'; Davy, *Fragmentary Remains, Literary and Scientific of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart*, 142.
- 40 For example, Humphry Davy to Grace Davy, 22 August 1812, in Fulford et al. *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*, vol. 2: 339. Written from Dunrobin Castle, the Scottish seat of the Marquess of Stafford, Davy managed to namedrop a further two dukes and an earl with whom they would be staying.
- 41 The research for this essay was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Project CIRGEN, ERC Grant Agreement No 787015). I am thankful to the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin (MPIWG-Berlin) in which part of this research took place.

- 42 On wet-nursing see Sussman, *Selling Mother's Milk*; Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing*.
- 43 For a comparison on the situation in other foundling houses, see Fuchs, *Abandoned Children* and Levene, *Childcare, Health and Mortality at the London Foundling Hospital, 1741–1800*. See also Styles, 'Objects of Emotion'.
- 44 On the Spanish intellectual and political context in which the Junta de damas was set up, see Serrano, 'Chemistry in the city', 2013; Bolufer Peruga, 'Neither Male, Nor Female'; and Bolufer Peruga, 'Women in Patriotic Societies'.
- 45 On numbers as a measure of objectivity, see Porter, 'Making Things Quantitative', 1994.
- 46 A good revision of the historiography can be found in Jardine, 'State of the Field', 2017. See also Bittel, Leong, and von Oertzen, 'Introduction' and Oertzen, 'Keeping Prussia's House in Order'. On notebooks and note taking as paper-technologies, see Heesen, 'The Notebook: A Paper-Technology'; Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science*. Also useful is Blair, *Too Much To Know*. On paperwork, lists and other literary technologies, see Kafka, 'Paperwork', 2009; Yale, 'The history of archives', 2015; Delbourgo and Müller-Wille, 'Listmania', 2012.
- 47 Details of how the inscription of babies in legend books worked in Serrano, 'Bookkeeping for Caring'.
- 48 Hess and Mendelsohn, 'Case and series', 2010.
- 49 Oertzen, Rentetzi, and Watkins, 'Finding Science in Surprising Places', 2013.

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