“The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman’s Nature is Capable”:
Breastfeeding and the Sentimental Maternal Ideal in America 1750-1860

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department
of History.

Chapel Hill
2009

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Abstract

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(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Hall)

In the mid eighteenth century, Enlightenment debates about women’s social role prompted a flurry of discussions about motherhood. Advice manuals, images of mothers, and women’s personal writings highlighted breastfeeding as one of the most important maternal duties. This thesis argues that by the end of the eighteenth century advice manuals developed a new focus on the emotional and physical pleasure of breastfeeding. This rhetoric of pleasure contributed to the construction of a sentimental maternal ideal that remained the most important feminine script well into the nineteenth century, although the personal writings of mothers suggest that this ideal did not always reflect experience. At the same time, the erotic undertone in public discussions of breastfeeding suggested ambivalence toward maternal sexuality by both embracing and disguising women’s pleasure. I suggest that the pleasure of breastfeeding offered possibilities for mediating and exploring sexuality within the context of marriage and socially sanctioned motherhood.

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Introduction

In 1809 American midwife Mary Watkins published a treatise on mothering in which she admonished, “we may reckon among the disadvantageous consequences attending on the neglect of nursing—the mother is deprived of a very high source of pleasure, of the most tender and endearing kind, which also remarkably strengthens her attachment to the infant of her bosom.”¹ Watkins’s remarks reflected a dialogue about maternal breastfeeding among medical professionals and moralists on both sides of the Atlantic that had begun in the mid eighteenth century. Worried about high rates of infant mortality and the use of wet nurses, proponents of maternal nursing initially stressed nature, health and divine ordination to highlight the importance of this duty. By the time Watkins issued her appeal to maternal pleasure, an important shift in the arguments in favor of maternal breastfeeding had occurred. Whereas mid eighteenth-century advice manuals criticized women for their selfish neglect of duty, by the end of the century they employed a new sentimental rhetoric that emphasized maternal pleasure and the affective bonds of motherhood. The rhetoric of pleasure in representations of breastfeeding contributed to the development of a sentimental maternal ideal that dominated white middle-class conceptions of womanhood into the mid nineteenth century.

¹ Mary Watkins, *Maternal Solitude* (New York: H.C. Southwick, 1809), 9.

The period from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth was a transitional phase for ideas of womanhood in Anglo-American culture.² English and American writers began to articulate a new conception of women as mothers and even came to equate the two. To be a woman *was* to be a mother, and to be a good mother was to fulfill the highest and most sacred purpose of womanhood. Ruth Bloch has argued that eighteenth-century Anglo-American ideals of womanhood “dwelt primarily on woman’s relationships to God and man as Christian, wife, and social companion,” rather than invoking the theme of motherhood. By the end of the century, “older ideals of domestic competence and ornamental purity” had combined to create the ideal of the “moral mother.”³

According to Bloch, the ideal of the “moral mother” reflected the influence of Enlightenment philosophy that had begun to make its way across the Atlantic from France and England to America in the mid eighteenth century. New ideas about the perfectibility of mankind led writers such as French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to reconsider the roles of men and women and how women in particular contributed to

² Ruth Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815,” in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 58. Bloch describes the transitional process toward defining motherhood as a “longer-term, transnational, and essentially cultural rather than political process” (57) and locates the beginning of this transition in the mid eighteenth century. One scholar who locates important change in the nineteenth century is Nancy M. Theriot (*Mothers and Daughters in the Nineteenth Century: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* [Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996]). She argues that “imperial motherhood” constituted the major script for women between 1830 and 1860 and promoted a domestic ideology that equated “woman” with “mother.” This script had three major aspects: child-centeredness, feminine power through motherhood, and physical mothering as essential to women’s happiness. However, discussions of breastfeeding in advice manuals suggest that a similar script for ideal motherhood evolved much earlier than she claims.

³ Bloch, “Moral Mother,” 60, 66. Bloch in particular discusses the proliferation of advice about breastfeeding and infant care as evidence of a new focus on motherhood as woman’s primary identity.

social progress.⁴ Linda Kerber has also identified the late eighteenth century as an important period of change by arguing that the American Revolution was a major turning point for ideas of motherhood in America. She proposes that the ideology of “Republican motherhood” offered women new authority and new opportunities for education by envisioning the maternal role as the foundation of a virtuous citizenry.⁵ However, an examination of maternal advice manuals shows that the idea of moral maternal influence preceded the American Revolution and prompted the dissemination of moral and medical treatises for the education of mothers as early as the mid eighteenth century.⁶ These texts hint at the sentimental idealization of motherhood that would reach its height by the nineteenth century.

Although mid and late eighteenth-century advice manual authors believed that motherhood was a biological and instinctual role, they mistrusted women’s ability to perform it. Mixing unveiled criticism with increasing sentimentalism—an often saccharine emphasis on feeling, on the sensuous appreciation of nature and humanity—

⁴ For a discussion of women’s roles according to Enlightenment philosophy see Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), especially pages 3-4. Henry May (*The Enlightenment in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) suggests that Rousseau was widely read in America in the 1780s and ‘90s and that his work *Emile* (1762) was particularly influential on new ideas of motherhood. Social historians have also attributed changes in ideas of motherhood to shifts in family structure and falling birthrates. Catherine Scholten (*Childbearing in American Society: 1650-1850*. New York: New York University Press, 1985, p. 51) has argued that as the birthrate fell in most areas of the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women’s roles became focused less on childbirth and more on child nurture. Moreover, when faced with the pressures of growing urbanization and industrialization, the family became a more insular unit of which the mother became the focal point.

⁵ See Linda Kerber (*Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and Rosemarie Zagarri (“Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1992): 192-215) for a more in-depth discussion of “Republican Motherhood” and its origins.

⁶ Based on her reading of the personal writings of white southern women, Katy Simpson Smith also suggests that key changes in the conception and practice of motherhood over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were influenced by Enlightenment thought rather than by the American Revolution. See ““Authors of Their Being”: The Enactment of Elite Southern Motherhood, 1750-1820” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2008).

these authors wrote manuals to encourage, educate, and correct mothers. Breastfeeding often appeared at the center of their prescriptions for good mothering, an allegedly instinctual practice that women supposedly did not attend to with due diligence. These discussions of breastfeeding highlight the idea that the “biological phenomena of fertility control, pregnancy, birth, and lactation are never merely biological; they are experienced within the rituals, expectations, and technology of a particular historical time and place.”⁷ Indeed, exploring the rise of pleasure as a central component in written discussions of breastfeeding from the mid eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century reveals an important facet in the development of the sentimental maternal ideal as a cultural script, written and gradually revised over the decades without altering its essentials.

Because breastfeeding was an experience shared by the majority of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it provides historians with an ideal lens through which to understand how the cultural script of sentimental motherhood developed over time. The graphic, even erotic, focus on pleasure in written representations of breastfeeding in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century raises new questions about romantic love and female sexuality in the context of motherhood.⁸ This essay will combine close analyses of published discussions of breastfeeding, prints and daguerreotypes of nursing women, and the personal writings of mothers to show how the rhetoric of breastfeeding as a pleasure elucidates the development of the sentimental maternal ideal and raises new questions about the construction of motherhood in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America.

⁷ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in the Nineteenth Century: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 40.

⁸ Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860* (New York: Harrington Press, Inc., 1985), 57.

The Symbolic Breast: Non-Maternal Representations of Breastfeeding

Prior to the rise of the mother as the ultimate womanly ideal, an ideal which retained its Christian underpinnings yet functioned as a secular feminine model, maternal imagery often worked in the service of religion. The Virgin Mary had served as an icon for the Catholic Church for centuries, evoking a direct link between God, Christ, and the virtuous mother. Her life, her motherhood, her alleged sinlessness, and her death provided fodder for popular legend as well as theological debates.⁹ Her image and her spiritual model offered an emotionally accessible manifestation of God's love for humanity as well as representing the pinnacle of maternal devotion. Paintings and sculptures of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus suggested a common bond with more ordinary mothers while underscoring her exceptional virtue as the mother of Christ. Women might aspire to the same tenderness and humility, the same maternal devotion, but Mary was ultimately a mother whose sacred role had little bearing on the pragmatic reality of mothering although her symbolism permeated many Catholic households. She was, as Margaret Miles has suggested, a good mother "who could be counted on to nurse not only her son but, through him, all Christians."¹⁰

⁹ See for example Elizabeth Walsh's examination of the meaning of the Virgin Mary and in particular the representation of her death in "Images of Hope: Representations of the Death of the Virgin East and West," *Religion and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (March 2007): 1-44.

¹⁰ Margaret R. Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Nudity, Gender, and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. (New York: Icon Editions, 1992): 35.

Religious texts from early New England also demonstrate the consistent importance of maternal imagery to religious ideology. While Puritan sermons from the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century did not directly discuss ideals of motherhood, they often used the lactating breast as a metaphor for the expression of religious ideas. David Leverenz has noted the use of the female body in Puritan sermons to illustrate spiritual concepts. He asserts that “a surprising analogy often appears in Puritan sermons to describe the minister’s function. Without leering, and with no fear that their manhood was threatened, preachers called themselves ‘breasts of God.’”¹¹ Perhaps his most striking example of this rhetoric is Cotton Mather’s funeral sermon. Mather wrote with due solemnity that, “Such *Ministers* are your *Mothers* too. Have they not Travailed in *Birth* for you, that a CHRIST may be seen *formed in you*? Are not their *Lips* the *Breasts* thro’ which the *sincere Milk of the Word* has pass’d unto you, for your Nourishment?”¹² For Mather, the word of God was like mother’s milk, transferred through the body of the minister for the spiritual sustenance of his congregation. The minister, a fundamentally paternal figure, represented himself through fundamentally maternal imagery. Unlike paintings of the breastfeeding Mary, these sermons dissociated the function of breastfeeding from the mother, using maternal rhetoric without the presence of the maternal body.

This imagery focused on maternal functions yet offered no hint that these functions could combine to create the specifically feminine ideal of the mother. Indeed,

¹¹ David Leverenz. *The Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Literature, Psychology, and Social History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 1.

¹² Cotton Mather, *A Father Departing*. . . (Boston: 1723), 22-23. Cited in Leverenz, *Puritan Feeling*, 1. I would like to express my thanks to David Leverenz for bringing this interesting passage to my attention.

few early New England texts focused on women as mothers, instead discussing women as virtuous Christians. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has suggested that few works on childbirth or motherhood existed in New England at this time due to “the reluctance of the ministers to stress ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ themes over a common Christianity.”¹³ Instead of differentiating between masculine and feminine social roles, Puritan writers preferred to emphasize the common duties of all Christians. The apparent contradiction of applying images of maternal biology to male figures shows that the figure of the mother had yet to become a secular icon with her own cherished role.¹⁴ Instead, maternal functions could be detached from the female body and applied as metaphors to elucidate religious concepts.

The Puritan ministers’ use of breastfeeding as a metaphor dissociated from maternity was neither an isolated nor a fleeting phenomenon. The story of “The Grecian Daughter” captured the imagination of artists in Europe and America across the centuries. In 1625 the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens painted one of the better known versions of this tale, *Simon and Pero (Roman Charity)*, to portray a dramatic moment in which the virtuous daughter nurses her father.¹⁵ This scene was brought to audiences by the Irish dramatist Arthur Murphey in 1772. *The Grecian Daughter: a tragedy* was then reprinted in Philadelphia in 1791 based on the version “performed with universal applause by the

¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 30.

¹⁴ The interchangeability of male and female imagery in these Puritan texts may also reflect the fact that male and female sexual organs were seen as essentially the same until the late eighteenth century. Thomas Laqueur (*Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) shows that early notions of sexual difference supposed that women’s genitals were the inverted version of men’s. Indeed, Laqueur has demonstrated the fluidity of the sexed body and suggested instead that gender rather than sex was seen as the fixed category prior to the Enlightenment.

¹⁵ Title, date, and image available at *The Athenaeum*: www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=30936

American Company.”¹⁶ A poem and engraving of the scene circulated in America in several versions in the mid and late eighteenth century. This representation told the story of a father, condemned to starve to death for an untold crime, whose daughter saved his life by feeding him from her breast. Upon discovering her actions, the emperor was so moved by the courage and loyalty of the young woman that he pardoned her father and rewarded her.

Figure 1. “The Grecian Daughter,” engraving by R.E. Smith, Boston c. 1798.

Like Rubens’s painting, the engraving that accompanied the poem displayed the father, chained and mostly unclothed with flowing beard and hair, reclining as his

¹⁶ Arthur Murphey, *The Grecian Daughter: A Tragedy* (Philadelphia: Henry Taylor, 1791). Early American Imprints, Series 1: Evans, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>>.

daughter knelt beside him and held her large breast to his lips.¹⁷ Here, breastfeeding became a heroic endeavor that elevated the young woman in the eyes of her father and her emperor who honored her for her courage and virtue. Yet in a surprising twist, the poem referred to the nursing woman as “daughter” and “wife,” but never as “mother.” This romantic narrative of the “Grecian Daughter” showed that breastfeeding could serve as a signifier of virtue and power without reference to motherhood. As in earlier Puritan sermons, the function of breastfeeding was disconnected from the biological reality of maternity. Indeed, in spite of the biological evidence of maternity, the narrative ignored the presence (or absence!) of the child she must have borne.

¹⁷ R. E. Smith, engraver; poem, anonymous, “The Grecian daughter” (Windsor, VT: Alden Spooner, 1798). Early American Imprints, Series 1: Evans, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>>. The original poem is tentatively dated to the 1760s with additional versions of the poem and engraving existing from 1776 (Boston: sold by T. & J. Fleet, 1776-1797) and 1794 (Boston: printed by E. Russel).

Advice Manuals and the Rhetoric of Pleasure

Representations of breastfeeding in religious texts as well as secular pieces such as the “Grecian Daughter” had little or no bearing on the lives and work of living mothers in early America, nor did they attempt explicitly to shape mothering practices. But in the mid eighteenth century secular writers began to address the role of the mother and attempt to define her place in society. The medical profession in particular began a more specific campaign to improve mothering as physicians and even the occasional female midwife published advice for mothers during pregnancy, childbirth, and the early years of their children’s lives. By the nineteenth century a few women began to put their own beliefs and expertise as mothers into print, combining the medical approach of physicians with a more emotional focus on the experience of motherhood. These medical and moral manuals from the eighteenth century on ultimately contributed to a new sentimentalized image of motherhood in American society.

Advice manual authors invariably included breastfeeding as one of their most important topics for discussion. They expressed concern for maternal and infant health and criticized women for thwarting God and nature by refusing to nurse. Whether the majority of American mothers truly neglected breastfeeding is difficult to ascertain, but the issue of infant feeding did become a problem in cases of maternal illness or death. Janet Golden’s history of wet nursing has shown that women either chose not to breastfeed or were prevented from breastfeeding for a number of reasons including

disease, breast infections or abscesses, fatigue, and stress. These circumstances, as well as the dire reality of maternal mortality, meant that some infants had to be fed either by hand or at the breast of another woman. Many women had female friends and relatives who could temporarily nurse their infant while they recovered, while others hired wet nurses into their homes or even sent their children to the nurses' homes.¹⁸

Throughout the eighteenth century breast milk was in high demand. Advertisements for wet nurses abounded in local newspapers, announcing, with little variation, that "A certain person wants a wet nurse into the house, to suckle a child."¹⁹ Many women advertised their own services, proposing that "A young woman with a new breast of milk, wants a place in a genteel family, as wet nurse."²⁰ Indeed, Ernest Caulfield has argued that "breast milk was the most frequently advertised commodity in American newspapers."²¹ While these advertisements did not reveal the reasons for which a woman's services were needed or offered, they did illustrate that proponents of maternal nursing had at least some cause for concern. Moreover, they exposed the real economic value of mothers as producers. The cost of hiring a wet nurse meant that providing such a service offered needed income for poor mothers, while middle- and upper-class families were more likely than poor families to be able to hire a wet nurse to replace the

¹⁸ Golden, *History of Wet Nursing*. See chapter 1 for a history of infant feeding practices in Europe and Colonial America. Golden stresses the variation in maternal mortality depending on geographic location. Death rates were generally lower in New England than in the South, and Golden estimates an overall range of 6 per 1,000 births to 20 per 1,000 births (p. 19).

¹⁹ Advertisement, Monday November 15-November 22, 1714, *The Boston News-Letter*, issue 553: 2.

²⁰ Advertisement, January 15, 1795, *The Daily Advertiser* [New York], vol. XI, 3095: 4. Thousands of advertisements for wet nurses can be found in colonial and early American newspapers, although numbers declined in the nineteenth century.

²¹ Ernest Caulfield, "Infant Feeding in Colonial America." *Journal of Pediatrics* XLI (1952): 677.

productivity of the mother. For this reason, many critics linked the refusal to breastfeed with fashion and wealth.

Moreover, authors of maternal advice manuals often represented poor mothers as more likely to nurse their children while vilifying elite mothers for bad mothering. They exaggerated class differences with respect to childrearing and tended to romanticize the natural mothering they imagined prevalent in more “rustic” settings:

The Mother who has only a few Rags to cover her child loosely, and little more than her own Breast to feed it, sees it healthy and strong. . . . while the puny Insect, the Heir and Hope of a rich Family lies languishing under a Load of Finery. . . .abhorring and rejecting the Dainties he is crammed with, till he dies a Victim to the mistaken Care and Tenderness of his fond Mother.²²

Proponents of maternal breastfeeding singled out elite women to criticize their vanity and pride and their “inhumane Treatment of our tender little Ones.” Yet in contradictory fashion, they also wrote scornfully of poor women whose bad morals and uncouth ways made them unfit to be wet nurses. In particular, they worried about the dangerous effects of these wet nurses, whose “savage Tempers, and vile Affections” could corrupt the constitution of the infants in their charge.²³

Such writers encouraged mothers to nurse by stressing the dictates of health and nature. British physician William Cadogan’s influential work on childrearing circulated in both England and America in numerous editions in the mid and late eighteenth century and made his case for maternal breastfeeding by emphasizing mother and infant health and the authority of nature: “If we follow Nature, instead of leading or driving it, we

²² William Cadogan, M.D., *An Essay Upon Nursing and the Management of Children*, 4th ed. (London: J. Roberts, 1750), 7. This work was originally published in London in 1748 and was reprinted in Boston (1772) and Philadelphia (1773).

²³ Sophia Hume, *An Exhortation to the Inhabitants of South Carolina* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1748), 120.

cannot err.” Moreover, he insisted that by breastfeeding, “the Mother would likewise, in most hysterical nervous cases, establish her own health by it . . . as well as that of her offspring.”²⁴ Concerned with the health of infants, British physician Hugh Smith lamented that he was “heartily sorry the present manner of bringing up children puts me, in some measure, under the necessity of proving milk to be the best food that can be given them.”²⁵

In addition to criticizing mothers and emphasizing the healthful effects of breastfeeding for mother and child, these early authors hinted at the concept of pleasure that was to become a significant method of persuasion by the end of the eighteenth century. Cadogan complained that women who refused to nurse their children did not understand that, “were it rightly managed, there would be much Pleasure in it.”²⁶ French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose writings on motherhood and education became influential in England and America, pressed his case more strongly, proposing that “when mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart. . . In the cheerful home life the mother finds her sweetest duties and the father his pleasantest recreation.”²⁷ Hugh Smith worried that the few women who were unable to nurse were “thus deprived of a happiness, only known to

²⁴ Cadogan, *Essay*, 13, 17.

²⁵ Hugh Smith, *The Female Monitor* (Wilmington, DE: Peter Brynberg, 1801), 61. Originally printed in London in 1767 (?), the first American edition of this work was printed in Philadelphia by Matthew Carey, 1792 and was reprinted in numerous editions in the early nineteenth century as well.

²⁶ Cadogan, *Essay*, 27.

²⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (1762). Translated by Barbara Foxley. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1966, 13.

those who enjoy it.”²⁸ Cadogan, Rousseau, and Smith, whose works were printed and cited well into the nineteenth century, perhaps best represented the transitional nature of ideas of motherhood in this period. Combining a harsh critique of negligent mothers with hints at maternal enjoyment, their works reflected a gradual shift to sentimental representations of breastfeeding and motherhood and a new emphasis on the moral influence of mothers.

By the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the rhetoric of pleasure became a primary vehicle for representing and promoting maternal breastfeeding and helped to solidify the sentimental maternal ideal. The image of the chaste, tender and dutiful mother proliferated in advice manuals, popular literature and mother-child portraits. These cultural texts emphasized the sentimental familial bonds forged by a good mother and strengthened by the act of nursing. Advocates of maternal breastfeeding argued that nursing was “an obligation so strongly enforced by nature, that no woman can evade the performance of it with impunity. But cheerful obedience to this sovereign law is attended with the sweetest pleasures of which the human heart is susceptible.”²⁹ Samuel Jennings intoned, “Do your duty as a mother, and you shall receive your just reward.”³⁰ Physician Thomas Ewell wondered “how any woman could be so lost to the feelings of nature, as to give up the pleasure of this undertaking.”³¹

²⁸ Smith, *Monitor*, 71.

²⁹ William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers* (Boston: Joseph Bumstead, 1809), 61. This work was printed first in London (1803) and went through several American reprints: Philadelphia (1804), Charleston, S.C. (1807), New York (1812), Boston (1813).

³⁰ Samuel K. Jennings, *The Married Lady's Companion, or poor man's friend*, 2nd ed. (New York: J.C. Totten, 1808), 15.

³¹ Thomas Ewell, M.D., *Letters to Ladies, detailing Important Information . . .* (Philadelphia: printed for the author, 1817), 219.

For these writers, the desire to breastfeed constituted an innate aspect of motherhood; the mother who neglected the practice or was unable to nurse was therefore an unnatural or an unlucky mother. Physician William Dewees suggested with little forbearance that those “women who may stifle this strong maternal yearning. . . . have ever been the subject of the satirist’s lash, and the object of the moralist’s declamation.” But his criticism was softened by his suggestion that nursing enjoyable as well as necessary: “*She must not delegate to any being the sacred and delightful task of suckling her child, unless there be the most decided and insurmountable impropriety in continuing it at her own breast.*”³²

By emphasizing pleasure as an inherent part of nursing, proponents of maternal nursing naturalized a vision of the ideal mother whose happiness depended on an intimate connection with her infant. Popular nineteenth-century American author Lydia Sigourney waxed poetic on the pleasures of the nursing mother and exhorted women to fulfill their natural role in order to bask in the joys of motherhood:

Were I to define the climax of happiness which a mother enjoys with her infant, I should by no means limit it to the first three months. The whole season while it is deriving nutriment from her, is one of peculiar, inexpressible felicity. Dear friends, be not anxious to abridge this halcyon period. Do not willingly deprive yourselves of any portion of the highest pleasure of which women’s nature is capable.³³

Sigourney placed the experience of nursing at the center of maternal happiness and encouraged mothers to embrace and extend this source of joy. Other writers linked the practical utility of breastfeeding to maternal satisfaction, for “happy the mother who *can*

³² William Dewees, M.D., *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children* (1825), 9th ed. (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1847), 54, 45.

³³ Lydia H. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (1830), 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839), 29.

suckle her infant; she who has not the power to do so is deprived of one of the greatest maternal pleasures, while her toils and anxieties are more than doubled.”³⁴ Breastfeeding was not only a pleasure, but it saved mothers the anxiety of entrusting their infant to wet nurses or struggling to feed them by hand.

Not only did the pleasure of nursing contribute to women’s happiness, but proponents also portrayed this pleasure as necessary to the mother’s good health. A popular mother’s magazine offered a brief sketch of the ideal woman, who

has health and love—woman’s highest blessings—and she takes her child to her breast, and imparts that nourishment which the Creator has designed for its sustenance; and in so doing she is conscious of a new principle of delight, physically and morally. The turbulence of love is past, and she has now that tranquil enjoyment best adapted to her health and her moral and intellectual growth.³⁵

Believing that the mother’s physical and psychological health promoted the wellbeing of her infant, this author was interested in promoting women’s happiness through the healthful act of breastfeeding. Moreover, her reference to the “turbulence of love” suggested that women’s romantic attachments were not conducive to good physical, mental, and spiritual health. Motherhood thus became the most wholesome and enjoyable component of a woman’s life.

Connecting the emotional satisfaction of motherhood to the physicality of maternity, advice manuals also portrayed breastfeeding as a profoundly physical experience that offered the mother sensual, even erotic, pleasure. William Buchan insisted that “all nurses concur in declaring, that the act itself is attended with sweet,

³⁴ Mrs. J. Bakewell, *The Mother’s Practical Guide in the Early Training of her Children* (New York: Lane and Sanford, 1843), 31. This work was first printed in London, 1836.

³⁵ Mrs. Seba Smith, “Anxious Mothers,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* 2, no. 12 (1842):265-266.

thrilling and delightful sensations of which those only who have felt them can form any idea,” and gushed that “the mental raptures of a fond mother at such moments are far beyond the powers of description or fancy.”³⁶ At the same time, some authors recognized that breastfeeding could involve discomfort and difficulty. Ann Allen wrote of breastfeeding as “a pleasing, although a painful sensation,” but urged mothers not to be deterred, for, “if you would be a happy mother. . . be a faithful mother, and you will be rewarded daily.”³⁷ Even Buchan’s rapturous conception of breastfeeding acknowledged the possibility of discomfort; but, he argued, “a little pain is easily surmounted, and is followed by lasting pleasure.”³⁸

Medical manuals did contain practical advice alongside their sentimental images of mothering. Most offered remedies for the complications of pregnancy and childbirth and infant illnesses as well as for such excruciating effects of lactation as abscessed breasts and cracked nipples, startling reminders of the more painful aspects of motherhood.³⁹ Authors nevertheless insisted on the pleasurable physicality of nursing, regardless of its medical complications. Mrs. Dawbarn exclaimed in her manifesto, *The Rights of Infants*, “what a *delightful* employment is it to *suckle a beloved child*, who repays the kindness it receives with the sweetest caresses!”⁴⁰ Physician William Dewees also highlighted the physical connection and mutual pleasure found by mother and infant

³⁶ Buchan, *Advice*, 31, 61.

³⁷ Ann Allen, *The Young Mother and Nurse’s Oracle* (Cincinnati, OH: E. Mendenhall, 1858), 62.

³⁸ Buchan, *Advice*, 32.

³⁹ For example, see Thomas Bull, *Hints to Mothers*. . . from the 3rd London addition with additions by an American physician (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1842). He insisted that women avoid damaging their breasts by excessively tight lacing and suggested that nursing women with painful breasts use a handkerchief passed around the neck and under the breasts for support (p. 177)

⁴⁰ Mrs. Dawbarn, *The Rights of Infants, or, a Letter from a Mother to a Daughter Relative to the Nursing of Infants* (Wisbech: John White, 1805), 11.

in the act of nursing. His work, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children* (1825), contained within a chapter on breastfeeding an entire section entitled “*As a Pleasure*.” He offers therein a strikingly erotic description of the physical pleasures of lactation:

If we can believe the *fond mother* upon this point, there is no earthly pleasure equal to that of suckling her child—and if any reliance can be placed upon external signs, she is every way worthy of belief. This pleasure does not seem to be the mere exercise of social feeling while the mother is witnessing the delight of the little hungry urchin, as it seizes upon the breast—nor from the rapturous expression of its speaking eye, nor the writhing of its little body from excess of joy—but from a positive pleasure derived from the act itself; for most truly it may be said, when

‘the starting beverage meets its thirsty lip,
‘Tis joy to yield it, as ‘tis joy to sip.’⁴¹

In Dewees’s estimation, breastfeeding was both a physical and an emotional experience, evocative of sensual and erotic pleasure for both mother and child.⁴² The mother did not enjoy nursing her child merely because she fulfilled her social duty, but because the connection between her body and that of her infant created a physically and emotionally pleasurable bond.

These representations of maternal pleasure culminated in a stress on the direct connection between the pleasure of the nursing mother and the strength of familial bonds. A sentimental poem from 1804 emphasized the power of the mother-infant connection, inquiring:

Who fed me from her gentle breast,

⁴¹ Dewees, *Treatise*, 55-56.

⁴² Dewees seems to hint at what Sigmund Freud would later make explicit in his work, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (James Strachey, trans., Angela Richards, ed. Harmondsworth; New York : Penguin Books, 1977), that the experience of sexual satisfaction begins with taking nourishment from the breast. As Freud writes, “No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life” (98).

And hush'd me in her arms to rest,
And on my cheek sweet kisses press'd?

The refrain of each stanza, “My mother,” reinforced the sentimental appeal of maternal love while linking the affections of the son to the physical care of the mother.⁴³ “‘Can a woman forget her sucking child’ is the strong interrogatory of Him who formed the mother’s heart, and who knows perfectly all its emotions,” wrote the Reverend Storrs to stress the unique capacity of nursing to increase a mother’s love for her infant.⁴⁴ Lydia Sigourney spoke directly to the American mother and invoked a child-centered vision of womanly happiness:

You are sitting with your child in your arms. So am I. And I have never been as happy before. Have you? How this new affection seems to spread a soft, fresh green over the soul. Does not the whole heart blossom thick with plants of hope, sparkling with perpetual dew-drops? What a loss, had we passed through the world without tasting this purest, most exquisite fount of love.⁴⁵

In Sigourney’s vision of motherhood, the bond between mother and child superseded all other affective ties. In her portrait of maternal happiness, motherhood became a unique female religion and breastfeeding a manifestation of piety.

⁴³ “Filial Recollections” (New York: Samuel Wood, 1804).

⁴⁴ Reverend Dr. Storrs, “The Mother’s Love,” in *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* 9, no. 1 (1847), 5.

⁴⁵ Sigourney, *Letters*, vii.

Breastfeeding, Romantic Love, and Sexuality

Many authors placed great importance on the link between maternal breastfeeding and marital happiness. Insisting that “a charming offspring will assuredly contribute to unite parents in the lasting bond of friendship,” Hugh Smith suggested that the healthful effects of breast milk on the infant would in turn solidify the marital union, uniting mother and father in their pride and love for their thriving child.⁴⁶ Others evoked a more sensual relationship between husband and wife, suggesting that “there is no enjoyment in nature which affords such exquisite pleasure as is felt by a tender mother, when she is nourishing her infant at her breast, and beholds her husband smiling in approbation.”⁴⁷ Rapturously describing how a husband must feel upon seeing “a dear little cherub at your breast,” Smith wrote that, “How ardent soever such an one’s affections might be before matrimony, a scene like this will more firmly rivet the pleasing fetters of love.”⁴⁸

These authors not only revealed the significance of breastfeeding as a symbol of love and duty, but they also spoke to the place of sexuality in marriage and to the growing importance of romantic love. In her work on courting and marriage in Victorian America, Karen Lystra argues that by 1830 Americans saw romantic love as a necessary component of any marriage and one that preoccupied the thoughts and feelings of

⁴⁶ Smith, *Monitor*, 45.

⁴⁷ Dawbarn, *Rights*, 11.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Monitor*, 71.

middle-class couples and their families.⁴⁹ The connections that advice manual authors made between breastfeeding and marital happiness suggests that the romantic ideal may have emerged even earlier in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ The difference, however, lay in the importance placed on parenthood as necessary for a happy union. As one author explained, it was “after they have *become parents* together—that they can be completely enamored of each other; because it is her *maternal* relations which most of all endear the wife to her husband, besides making her love him inexpressibly more for being the *father of her idolized children*.”⁵¹ By performing the duties of a good mother, a wife exemplified her love for her husband. Through his admiration for her maternal solicitude, the husband was brought more firmly into the domestic realm.

With the husband included in the intimate family circle, the underlying issue of women’s sexuality loomed large. As the husband derived his enjoyment from the sensual satisfaction of mother and infant, breastfeeding became a three-way site of familial pleasure. It is difficult to miss the erotic undertones in the writings of authors such as Smith, Buchan, Dawbarn, Sigourney, and Dewees. Certainly their use of words such as *exquisite, ardent, thrilling, fancy, caresses, delight, seizes, rapturous, writhing*, and *excess* were infelicitous choices for distilling images of desexualized maternity, of women’s inherent “passionlessness.”⁵² Yet the tension between their use of words that

⁴⁹ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Monitor*, 71.

⁵¹ O.S. Fowler, *Love and Parentage, applied to the improvement of offspring* (1834), 13th edition (New York: Fowlers & Wells, 1850), 58.

⁵² The term “passionlessness” belongs to Nancy Cott. She explores the concept in her essay “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850” (*Signs*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (Winter, 1978): 219-236). Cott argues that “there was a traditionally dominant Anglo-American definition

disguised women's sexuality by emphasizing maternal purity—*chaste, tranquil enjoyment, tender, friendship*—and those that explored it attested to their ambivalence toward female sexuality and its relation to motherhood.

The tension between motherhood, breastfeeding, and female sexuality had a long history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was believed that sexual intercourse was detrimental to the flow and quality of breast milk. Abstinence was considered the appropriate choice for lactating mothers.⁵³ Based on her readings of eighteenth-century English texts, Ruth Perry has argued that “maternity came to be imagined as a counter to sexual feeling.”⁵⁴ At times the sexual undertones in descriptions of breastfeeding suggested a divided image of woman—as the object of men's desire and the maternal object of men's affections. Hugh Smith argued that, “though a beautiful virgin must ever kindle emotions in a man of sensibility, a chaste, and tender wife, with a little one at her breast, is certainly to her husband the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth.”⁵⁵ Contrasting the sexual appeal of the virgin with the desexualized image of the nursing mother, he implied that motherhood transformed women's sexual allure into something purer and more valuable. Smith presented the breast as the focus of the male gaze, but it became simultaneously desexualized *and* more desirable by virtue of being a maternal, lactating breast.

of women as *especially* sexual which was reversed and transformed between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries into the view that women (although still primarily identified by their female gender) were *less* carnal and lustful than men.” (221) Putting motherhood at the center of women's identity may have been one way of implementing these new ideas about women's lack of sexual passion.

⁵³ Paula Treckel, “Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 1 (1989): 31

⁵⁴ Perry, “Colonizing,” 209.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Monitor*, 76.

These simultaneous images of sexual and asexual maternity raise a number of questions. Why did advice manual authors go to such lengths to prove that mothers took pleasure from breastfeeding? Exactly what kind of pleasure did they imagine the husband derived from observing the act? What was at stake in these invocations of physical pleasure? Is Perry correct in suggesting that maternity and sexuality were seen as irreconcilable? One could read these references to women's pleasure as a means of concealing their sexuality under a sentimental cloak of chaste motherhood, a means of enforcing their passionlessness and a way of controlling men's supposedly aggressive sexuality. If women felt sensual pleasure, it was less threatening for them to take pleasure in the duties of mothering than in other less chaste activities. In this way breastfeeding might become the center of pleasure for mother, infant, and husband, creating a domestic ideal that repressed the more dangerous possibilities of women's sexual desire.

In their descriptions of the beauty, desirability, and virtue of nursing mothers, advice writers also suggested that breastfeeding created important familial ties that controlled men's sexuality. Smith argued that "By these powerful ties, many a man, in spite of impetuous passions, is compelled to continue the prudent, kind, indulgent, tender husband." Here the pleasures of breastfeeding replaced women's sexual pleasures while the beauty of the breastfeeding mother overshadowed in the husband's eye the sexual charms of the virgin and united the married pair in chaste "friendship."⁵⁶ By insisting on the respect due a virtuous mother, these authors envisioned a way of controlling men's carnal urges.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Monitor*, 70, 45.

Yet to assume that advice manual authors sought only to disguise women's sexuality too readily accepts twenty-first century assumptions about sexual repression in early America.⁵⁷ Karen Lystra argues that, with the ascendancy of romantic love in early nineteenth-century American culture, sex became an acceptable and even sacred component of a loving relationship. She writes that "both men and women saw sexual desire as the natural physical accompaniment and distillation of romantic love . . . Properly sanctioned by love, sexual expressions were read as symbolic communications of one's real and truest self, part of the hidden essence of the individual." Moreover, Lystra argues that Americans saw children as precious symbols of romantic love.⁵⁸ Thus motherhood and sexuality were not necessarily incompatible, for sexual enjoyment could be sanctioned and sanctified by romantic love and by parenthood.

Discussions of breastfeeding and marital relations hinted at this evolving attitude toward sexuality and romantic love in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The erotic undertones in the works of authors such as Smith and Dewees implied a willingness, an eagerness even, to explore women's capacity for sexual enjoyment even in the context of sentimental motherhood. At times these authors offered voyeuristic descriptions of the pleasures of breastfeeding. Dewees, for example, imagined a scene in which the viewer perceives the "external signs" of the mother's physical pleasure, while the mother appreciates the "writhing" of the infant at her breast from his "excess of

⁵⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has aptly noted in her article "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America" (*The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 84, Supplement: Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family [1978]: S212-S247) that "sexual repression has most fascinated scholars of the 19th century" (S212). While some of her own work as well as more recent work by other scholars such as Karen Lystra and Clare Lyons (*Sex Among the Rabble*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) has expanded to consider other attitudes toward sex, the concept of sexual repression still tends to dominate the field.

⁵⁸ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 59, 77.

joy.”⁵⁹ Smith’s evocation of maternal bliss pointed even more explicitly to the enjoyment of the imagined husband, who gazed on his nursing wife, “the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth,” and derived his pleasure from watching.⁶⁰ Whether these men understood that breastfeeding could in fact stimulate some of the same sensations as sexual activity, or whether they merely applied the same erotic possibilities to the lactating breast as to the explicitly sexualized female breast is unclear.⁶¹ Nevertheless, their descriptions of breastfeeding evoked inescapably erotic possibilities.

These erotically charged descriptions raise important questions about ideal motherhood and its stability and viability as a cultural script. Could the script of sentimental motherhood be reconciled with visions of a robust female sexuality? Did maternity and sexuality *need* to be reconciled? The language of pleasure employed by advocates of maternal breastfeeding performed important work in the cultural production of the sentimental maternal ideal, but their discussions of nursing neither fully disguised nor fully embraced female sexuality. Seamlessly invoking the joys and duties of motherhood *and* wifehood, William Buchan perhaps best summarized the multiple rewards of good mothering. In his view, the nursing mother

ensures the fulfillment of the promises made by the best writers on this subject—speedy recovery from child-bed, the firm establishment of good health, the exquisite sense of wedded joys, the capacity of bearing more children, the steady

⁵⁹ Dewees, *Treatise*, 55-56.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Monitor*, 76.

⁶¹ Recent scholarship in disciplines including sociology, anthropology and medicine has identified a physiological correlation between sexual arousal and the sensation of breastfeeding. In *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), Robbie Pfeufer Kahn writes that the hormone oxytocin stimulates labor, is released by nursing, and “also triggers orgasm, which results in rhythmic contractions of the uterus for as long as twenty minutes after lovemaking and during breastfeeding” (233-234). Cindy Stearns in her article “Breastfeeding and the Good Maternal Body” (*Gender and Society* 13, no. 3, June 1999, pp. 308-325) discusses the tension in today’s society between the maternal and the sexual breast and cites the case of Karen Carter who lost custody of her child for more than a year for voicing her concerns about feelings of sexual arousal when breastfeeding (309).

attachment of her husband, the esteem and respect of the public, the warm returns of affection and gratitude from the objects of her tender care, and after all, the satisfaction to see her daughters follow her example and recommend it to others.⁶²

Buchan's ideal maternal script connected the "exquisite sense of wedded joys," childbearing, and marital affection and respect. Although he did not specify which *wedded joys* were at stake, he implicitly tied together the sexual enjoyment of the husband, the wife, and the satisfaction of the good mother.

The issue of maternal sexuality provides a framework for exploring two of the most commonly shared experiences of women's lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—sex and motherhood. The vast majority of American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would become mothers in the course of their lives, but their experience of the sexual act and of the daily cares of motherhood varied widely. The discourse surrounding breastfeeding and ideal motherhood did not describe the lived experience of American mothers; nevertheless, most women were exposed to published writings, images of motherhood, or the advice of physicians, midwives, friends and relatives. Such discourses thus touched women's private lives and provided a possible framework for envisioning their lives and social roles.

⁶² Buchan, *Advice*, 61.

Visualizing Motherhood: Breastfeeding in Mother-Infant Portraits

Nineteenth-century mother-infant portraits offer an evocative intersection between individual experience and public discourse. Four daguerreotypes dating from 1845, 1848, 1850, and 1860 provide glimpses into the lives of four women and individual representations of motherhood.⁶³ However, these images do not present an unmediated expression of the experience of motherhood. We do not know under what conditions the daguerreotypes were produced. Was it the woman's decision to have this image taken? For whom were these images intended? What agency did the women have in the creation of the image? Was her husband involved? Still, unlike published advice manuals, they do preserve something of the identity of real women. The relative newness of photographic technology suggests that these portraits must have been important to the individuals involved—having one's photograph taken was not an everyday occurrence, even for the wealthy. The women and their children donned elegant gowns for the occasion and

⁶³ "Woman Breast-feeding Her Infant," Daguerreotype ca. 1845 (Harvard Fine Arts Library, Visual Collections - Slides and Digital Images, PAA82 1843A 70(a)); "Portrait of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby," Daguerreotype ca. 1848 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, PC136-1z); "Portrait in profile of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby," Daguerreotype ca. 1850 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, PC140-1z); "Portrait of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby," Daguerreotype ca. 1860 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, PC140-2z). Unfortunately, the lack of identification for these photos means that they raise more questions than they answer. What was the relationship between the woman and the photographer? Who decided to take this picture? Who were these women? Based on the middle-class appearance of the women's clothing and accessories I am working from the hypothesis that these women are not wet nurses but are in fact the mothers of the infants they nurse. However, this relationship is by no means assured.

displayed glimpses of lace and jewelry that further attest to the personal importance of these images. Given a rare opportunity to create an enduring image, the women in the photographs as well as the photographers themselves must have carefully considered the impression they wished to preserve.

Figure 2. "Portrait of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby," ca. 1848
(Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University)

The deliberate construction of these images on the part of both subject and photographer raises the question, why breastfeeding? Although mother-child portraits were not uncommon in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, most displayed the mother with her child in her arms or at her side. These daguerreotypes show a mother seated with one breast exposed and her child in the act of nursing. By visualizing the intimate

physical connection between mother and child, these portraits privileged the same mother-infant bond that nineteenth-century advice manuals idealized. That the mother nurses the infant rather than merely holding it verifies her maternity—she *is* a mother, the real thing, and this image provides enduring evidence that she has fulfilled her maternal duty to nourish her child. These portraits speak to the practical and symbolic importance of breastfeeding at this time. But what did the portrait mean to the mother? Perhaps it reminded her of duties faithfully fulfilled; perhaps it spoke to her of maternal love; perhaps it reminded her of past pleasures and intimate moments.

Figure 3. "Portrait in profile of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby," ca. 1850 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University)

The daguerreotypes complicate the link between maternity and sexuality. They show the act of breastfeeding, a moment of possible sensual enjoyment; simultaneously,

they also display to the viewer the woman's bare breast, symbol, in other contexts, of her sexual charms. The conventions of female modesty led women to cover themselves carefully from neck to toe, yet these women sat in their elegant gowns with one breast exposed to the eyes of the (most likely male) photographer. The meaning of this breast would have been by no means assured. As one article in the *Ladies' Literary Cabinet* wrote of the ideal woman's physical attributes:

Let her enchanting bosom represent the celestial globes, of which a rose-bud shall form the magnetic pole. Let it offer to desire its first enjoyment—its first nourishment to infancy; and let man ever remain in doubt whether it has most contributed to the happiness of the father or the son.⁶⁴

The viewer may question who this breast was intended to please. The infant's pleasure, and perhaps the mother's as well, occurred in the moment in which the photograph was taken. Yet the still image of this moment had the potential to feed the fancy of the male viewer who could interpret the image according to his own desire.

The exposure of these women's bodies to the camera and the sexual possibilities represented by the bare breast is surprising to the modern viewer. Yet these portraits desexualized even as they exposed the female breast by visualizing it in the service of maternity. Just as the act of nursing could emphasize chastity over sexuality in advice manuals, these photographs challenged the sexual objectification of women. Moreover, these images implicitly referenced the religious tradition of the nursing Madonna. Art historian Margaret Miles has explored paintings and sculptures of the nursing Madonna in Renaissance Tuscan culture to reveal the tension between religious meaning, women's nurturing power, and sexuality. While the breastfeeding Virgin symbolized the "fantasy

⁶⁴ "Woman," *Ladies' Literary Cabinet* VII, no. 1, Saturday, December 21, 1822 (New York: printed and published by Nathaniel Smith & Co.): 5. The introduction to the article reads: "The following idea of the formation of Woman, is extracted from a Treatise, entitled *Philosophia de l'Univers*, written by Dupont De Nemours.—Perhaps a more eloquent and delightful description never came from the pen of man."

of a totally good mother,” she was also “an intensely ambivalent symbol, evoking for men a closely woven mixture of danger and delight and, for women, the emotional quandaries surrounding the nursing of infants.”⁶⁵ The glimpse of nudity in Italian art and in these nineteenth-century American daguerreotypes suggests to the viewer conflicting ideas, both dangerous and benign.

As Daniel Blake Smith has noted, “the ideal woman was defined in asexual terms: propriety, decency, modesty, and delicacy were the constituents of female virtue. But the very effort to conceal sexual feelings in male-female relationships exposed the preoccupation with these impulses.”⁶⁶ Michel Foucault has likewise insisted that scholars must “abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression.”⁶⁷ By visualizing the breast as maternal these photographs explicitly idealized women as mothers, even as they exposed women’s bodies to the potentially desirous gaze of the male viewer. Read together with Dewees, Smith, and others, these images provide the visual counterpart to their voyeuristic descriptions of breastfeeding as pleasurable. But did women themselves actually experience breastfeeding as a pleasure? Did they take pride in nursing as a symbol of their maternal virtue? Or was it merely a practical and necessary duty?

Although these daguerreotypes open for the historian a small window into lived experiences, it nevertheless remains difficult to gauge how women understood and enacted ideals of motherhood in their daily lives. Advice manuals and popular texts

⁶⁵ Miles, “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast,” 34-35.

⁶⁶ Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 138.

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume I, Robert Hurley, translator (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 49.

expressed dominant cultural scripts, but did not necessarily represent the attitudes, experiences, and practices of their readers. More importantly, they did not represent the perspectives of women who could never have direct access to these ideas: poor women, enslaved women, illiterate women.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ One work that seeks to access the maternal experience specifically of slave women is Mary Jenkins Schwartz's, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Schwartz works to construct the experience of enslaved motherhood and suggests that, as did white parents, "Slaves valued children for their universal ability to charm, entertain, love, and be loved and because the birth of a child strengthened families and communities while contributed in important ways to the family economy. The presence of children allowed mothers and fathers alike to experience life beyond the role of slave. The survival of their people depended on the birth of infants" (93). Moreover, Schwartz shows that breastfeeding often had a vastly different and more desperate meaning to enslaved mothers. She cites a poem by fugitive slave William Wells Brown to wrote in the voice of a mother: "The morn was chill—I spoke no word,/--But feared my babe might die,/And heard all day, or thought I heard,/--My little baby cry./At noon, oh, how I ran and took/--My baby to my breast!/I lingered—and the long lash broke/--My sleeping infant's rest." (225)

Experiences of Breastfeeding: Women's Personal Writings

Even the personal writings of white middle- and upper-class women often contradicted the ideals represented in published texts. In their letters and journals, these women wrote about breastfeeding in ways that revealed ambivalence toward sentimental ideas of nursing and an eagerness to offer their own advice, attitudes, and opinions about mothering. Women writing at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth remarked frequently on nursing, weaning, and the general health of their children. At times, these references to breastfeeding expressed the pleasure women derived from the practice. Often they were simply matter-of-fact statements of daily cares. Sometimes, women wrote of the discomfort, pain and frustration attending their maternal duties.

To be sure, sometimes women echoed the sentiments of the advice manuals. Writing in her diary in 1857, southern mother Rebecca Turner expressed her attachment to nursing when she wrote, "How am I to relinquish so sweet an office—that of giving nourishment to my darling? Are these foolish tears that dim my eyes when I think of the times, when he will no longer nestle in my bosom through the silent watches of the night?"⁶⁹ Her attitude toward nursing placed her within the framework of the sentimental ideal, emphasizing the emotional and physical experience of breastfeeding as one of her most treasured tasks. Sometimes women attached so much importance and enjoyment to

⁶⁹ Rebecca Allen Turner, "Little Jesse's Diary," August 29, 1857, in Jesse Turner, Sr., Papers. Manuscript Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. Also cited in McMillen, "Sacred Duty," 333.

breastfeeding that they feared mothers might persist in nursing even if ill health rendered it inadvisable. Harriet Allston did not hesitate to advise her sister in her duty to herself and her infant daughter, insisting in a letter that “to nurse her when you are not at all able would be a selfish gratification entirely.”⁷⁰ Other women both evoked the pleasure of breastfeeding and criticized mothers who did not nurse their children. Sarah Cary, for example, inquired in a letter, “Tell me, my dear, if you intend, like other town ladies to sacrifice the pleasure of nursing the dear one to *fashion*? If you do I pity you, for you are possessed of too much sensibility to do it without giving yourself great pain.”⁷¹ Other women were even more explicitly critical of mothers who did not or could not nurse their children. “She has a sweet good babe,” wrote Eleanor Lewis of a mother and her newborn, “but she is a helpless Mother, she cannot suckle it, and knows very little about the care of children. I hope you will see *my* little treasure next autumn, and his *devoted* Mother.”⁷² Breastfeeding could be a meaningful and precious aspect of motherhood that also divided good mothers from bad.

Much of the time, however, breastfeeding was a part of women’s lives that required neither dramatic commentary nor sentimental expression. Narcissa Prentiss Whitman wrote calmly of the birth of her daughter in 1836 and commented that her

⁷⁰ Harriet Allston, Letter to Adele Allston, January 8, 1838, in Allston Family Papers. South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C. Also cited in McMillen, “Sacred Duty,” 346.

⁷¹ Sarah Cary, Letter to Polly Gray, March 29, 1785, in *The Cary Letters*. Caroline G. Curtis, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1891). North American Women’s Letters and Diaries, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, <<http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com>>.

⁷² Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, Letter to Elizabeth Bordley, June 24, 1827, in *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*. Patricia Brady, ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). North American Women’s Letters and Diaries, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, <<http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com>>.

daughter “sleeps all night without nursing more than once sometimes not at all.”⁷³

Caroline Laurens wrote with similar tranquility about weaning her son, for “John was weaned from his mother’s breast. She, finding herself 4 months gone in pregnancy, was obliged to do—he was easily weaned. Whenever he woke at night, he would ask for ‘tee tee’ his mother would tell him it was all gone. He would repeat the words ‘all gone’ . . . and go quietly to sleep.”⁷⁴

At times, however, breastfeeding was painful and damaging, far from the physically and emotionally pleasurable experience that advice manuals promised. Indeed, some women described breastfeeding as destructive to health and happiness. Following the birth of her child, Mary Walker Richardson recorded on a daily basis the pain and difficulty she experienced attempting to breastfeed. “Nipples very sore. Worry with my babe. Get all tired out,” she wrote one day, only to continue the next with, “Milk so caked in my breasts, have apprehensions of 2 broken breasts.” By the end of the week, she complained of “Very little strength on account of suffering so much with my breasts.”⁷⁵ For several weeks, Richardson continued to write of her discouragement and ill health as a result of her attempts to breastfeed. Although Richardson had greater success with her next child, her diary entries continued to expose the grim difficulties faced by many nursing mothers.

⁷³ Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, Letter December 5, 1836, in *First White Women Over the Rockies, vol. 1: Where Wagons Could Go: Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding*. Clifford Merrill Drury, ed. (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1963), 126.

⁷⁴ Caroline Olivia Laurens, December 30, 1825, unpublished diary 1823-1827. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Physicians generally advised women to cease breastfeeding if they became pregnant as they believed that pregnancy would contaminate or decrease the quality of the breast milk.

⁷⁵ Mary Walker Richardson, Tuesday, December 11, 1838; Wednesday, December 12, 1838; Friday, December 14, 1838, in *First White Women Over the Rockies, vol. 2: On to Oregon: The Diaries of Mary Walker and Myra Eells*. Clifford Merrill Drury, ed. (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1963), 136.

Sometimes women wrote of their fears for their own health and that of female friends and family; they did not always share the beliefs of advice manual authors who insisted that breastfeeding was healthful for both mother and child. Elizabeth Drinker recorded in her diary in 1802 that “Molly Rhoads was here forenoon, she has made a beginning to wean her Son, having a great weakness in her Eyes . . . she has been told it is owing to her suckling such a strong lusty boy—and was told of a person who lost her sight by it—that after her child was wean’d, her sight was restored.”⁷⁶ Mostly women attributed more general health problems to breastfeeding, as did Eleanor Lewis when she wrote that “My Beloved Parke is better and I trust improving rapidly—she has been very weak and thin, and almost destroy’d herself by nursing.”⁷⁷ British diarist Frances Kemble concurred. “I attribute much of the wretched ill health of young American mothers to over nursing,” she wrote, “and of course a process that destroys their health and vigour completely must affect most unfavourably the child they are suckling.”⁷⁸

While many mothers saw breastfeeding as a desirable, even sacred goal, they often found themselves discouraged, fearful, ill, and uncomfortable. Their terse references to breastfeeding reflected the challenging reality of a daily struggle to maintain the health of self and children with limited medical care. Even if they wished to nurse their own children, some women resigned themselves to substituting the services of friends or hired wet nurses when they found the challenges of nursing insurmountable.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, December 7, 1802, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman*, Elaine Forman Crane, ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 251.

⁷⁷ Lewis, Letter to Elizabeth Bordley, April 27, 1827. North American Women’s Letters and Diaries, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, <<http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com>>.

⁷⁸ Frances Anne Kemble, Letter to Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick Rackemann, April 1, 1839, in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, John A. Scott, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 296.

The image of breastfeeding that emerges from these women's writings is more ambivalent than sentimental. Their descriptions of motherhood suggest a difference between the sentimental maternal ideal prevalent in advice manuals and literature and women's own experiences as mothers.

But the ambivalence that individual women felt toward the sentimental maternal ideal did not negate its salience as a cultural script in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Biologically designated as child bearers and nurses, women were now also defined as sentimental mothers by popular representations of motherhood. Real mothers sometimes struggled with their maternal duties, while advice manuals presumed that women's feelings and sensibilities induced them to cherish the task of childrearing and to embrace intuitively both the physical and emotional attributes of the ideal mother. A woman who failed to do so could only be an unnatural or deviant woman, "a monster," as William Buchan wrote.⁷⁹ Lydia Sigourney argued that

The love of children, in man is a virtue: in woman, an element of nature. It is a feature of her constitution, a proof of His wisdom, who, having entrusted to her the burden of the early nurture of a whole race, gave that sustaining power which produces harmony, between her dispositions, and her allotted tasks.⁸⁰

Whereas in the mid-eighteenth century William Cadogan had written that women lacked the proper knowledge— "to be acquired only by learned Observation and Experience"— to be good mothers and thus needed to be taught by men, by the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, the increasing emphasis on ideal sentimental motherhood privileged the "natural" abilities and affections of women.⁸¹ Women, or at

⁷⁹ Buchan, *Advice*, 30.

⁸⁰ Sigourney, *Letters*, 46.

⁸¹ Cadogan, *Essay*, 3.

least good women, were seen to fulfill naturally and instinctively the sentimental role of the ideal mother, who exemplified “true domestic bliss,/The fountain of maternal love,/Welling with happiness.”⁸²

Still there remained two sides to the maternal ideal. On the one hand, motherhood elevated women’s status in society; on the other, it subjected women to a specific standard that they were expected to fulfill. By being natural and affectionate, chaste and healthy, tender and nurturing, and above all by breastfeeding, mothers could embody the maternal ideal and gain a greater degree of recognition and authority than they could achieve as mere women. While the nursing mother enjoyed the pleasures of breastfeeding her child, she simultaneously became the affectionate moral and spiritual guardian of society, for “the *mistress* and *mother* of a family occupies one of the most important stations in the community.”⁸³ An article on “The Empire of Woman” concurred: “The early years of childhood, those most precious years of life and opening reason, are confined to woman’s superintendence; she, therefore, may be presumed to lay the foundation of all the virtues and all the wisdom that enrich the world.”⁸⁴ From the mother’s love and from the mother’s breast flowed the moral influence on which society depended. Lydia Sigourney wrote in a confidential tone to the universal American mother, “My friend, if in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness, you have also taken a higher place in the scale of being. A most important part

⁸² Mrs. E.W. Robins, “On a Mother and Her Infant,” in *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* 6, no. 6 (1845): 107.

⁸³ Ann Taylor, *Practical Hints to Young Females* (Boston: Wells & Lilly, 1816), 2-3.

⁸⁴ “The Empire of Woman,” in *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* 1, no. 1 (1841): 6.

is allotted you, in the economy of the great human family.” Sigourney did not mince words, for in being a mother, she wrote, “You have gained an increase of power.”⁸⁵

Still, real mothers did not always reflect this sense of heightened enjoyment and power; moreover, they could only do so by adhering to an often unreachable sentimental maternal ideal. When they strayed from this ideal, critics castigated them as unnatural, abhorrent, and even criminal. Discussions of breastfeeding assured women that if they nourished and cherished their infants, society would in turn cherish and admire them. But women who sought such recognition became implicitly subject to control. The abundance of advice manuals for mothers attests to the broad concern with regulating their behavior and ensuring their conformity to this sentimental vision of maternity. These writings taught women to conform to a particular ideal that would grant them influence in the domestic sphere even as it circumscribed them within a narrow vision of ideal womanhood.

⁸⁵ Sigourney, *Letters*, 9, 10.

Conclusion

Enlightenment discussions of woman's role in society made motherhood a new focus of attention in the mid eighteenth century. This interest translated into a proliferation of maternal advice manuals that exhorted women to fulfill their duty as mothers. Advice manual authors highlighted breastfeeding as "the first great trust which is reposed in them." Women were said to "form an hero in the cradle, and courage is received from the breast."⁸⁶ By the end of eighteenth century, advice manuals had developed a new focus on the emotional and physical pleasure of breastfeeding. This rhetoric of pleasure emphasized the tender, sensual, sentimental bond created between the nursing mother and her child and even suggested that simply by performing this maternal duty the mother would also promote marital affection between herself and her husband. Representations of breastfeeding contributed to the construction of a sentimental maternal ideal that privileged the affectionate, chaste, happy, healthy, and moral mother as the pinnacle of womanhood. This sentimental maternal ideal would remain the most important feminine script well into the nineteenth century. When Lydia Sigourney wrote the verses, "Thou hast a tender flower/Upon thy breast—fed with the dews of love," she epitomized the sentimentality that had come to characterize portrayals of motherhood by

⁸⁶ Smith, *Monitor*, 94-95.

the nineteenth century.⁸⁷ This ideal feminine model was a mother whose dedication to breastfeeding strengthened the physical and affective bond with her children while making her a more virtuous and endearing marital partner and a more perfect ornament to the home and to society.

The rhetoric of pleasure in representations of breastfeeding not only contributed to the construction of the sentimental maternal ideal, but also raised larger questions about romantic love and female sexuality. While privileging the mother-child bond, advice manuals also emphasized the importance of marital affection and even hinted at ways in which motherhood provided a context both for the control and the exploration of sexuality. At times, descriptions of breastfeeding disguised women's physical pleasure as chastely maternal. But ideas about romantic love privileged the emotional bonds of marriage and suggested that sex was the most sacred manifestation of marital affection. Descriptions of breastfeeding evoked women's potential for sensual enjoyment and hinted that men might take erotic pleasure from the spectacle of the breastfeeding mother. Ultimately, the pleasures of breastfeeding offered possibilities for mediating and exploring women's sexuality within the appropriate context of marriage and socially sanctioned motherhood.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries breastfeeding served as both a practical function and a symbolic act used to distinguish good and bad mothers. The language and images used to portray breastfeeding have shown how meanings of womanhood and motherhood can be produced and perpetuated over time. More importantly, the physicality of representations of breastfeeding reminds the historian that ideas about

⁸⁷ Lydia Sigourney, "The Mother's Sacrifice," in *The Mother's Assistant and Young Lady's Friend* 1, no. 10 (1841): 222.

motherhood must always eventually confront the experiences of real mothers. The discourse surrounding the act of breastfeeding can never be wholly separated from the maternal body—its pleasure, its discomfort, its strengths and weaknesses. By connecting ideas about woman's maternal role and the material reality of motherhood, breastfeeding provides a lens for exploring motherhood as a practice and an ideal.

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