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Author(s): Ruth Perry

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# Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England

RUTH PERRY

*Literature Faculty  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

But when mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens for the state; this first step by itself will restore mutual affection. [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*]

THE INVENTION OF childhood, ascribed by Philippe Ariès to late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, inevitably involved a vast train of changes in the organization of the family, the politics of domestic life, the separation of public from private responsibility, and the revision of accepted conventions about human priorities.<sup>1</sup> If we want to know more

My thanks to research assistants Allen Grove and Heather MacPherson for their help on this project. This essay is a somewhat expanded version of a paper presented at the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar VIII, "Social Reform and Cultural Discourse in the Eighteenth Century," a conference held with the Australasian and Pacific Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, June 25–29, 1990. Papers from that conference will be published in a forthcoming special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* (vol. 16, no. 1) edited by Robert Purks Maccubbin.

<sup>1</sup>Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960; English trans., New York, 1962), was followed by John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in a Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977); and Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1978), who have claimed that until the eighteenth century, childhood was not recognized as a stage of life distinct and separable from the rest of life. Children rather were assumed to be—and were treated as—miniature adults. These social historians infer this cultural fact from the way children were depicted earlier in paintings, with adult rather than infantine physical proportions, from the way they were dressed, and from the cultural assumption in printed sources that they were miserable sinners like their elders, rather than pure and plastic human material ready to be stamped with virtue, as John Locke thought, or guided tenderly toward

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about the effects of modern child-raising patterns on the structure of Anglo-American families and gender identities, we would do well to investigate the historical effects of this “invention of childhood.” Less frequently noted, but equally momentous, was the construction in that period of bourgeois motherhood—the dimensions of which current scholarship is establishing.<sup>2</sup> There is overwhelming literary evidence for the centrality of representations of motherhood to eighteenth-century English culture as a newly elaborated social and sexual identity for women.<sup>3</sup>

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their best innate moral natures, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought. There is no question that by the middle of the eighteenth century there was an emerging literature on the socialization of children, as well as a new market evolving for children’s toys and books. But the interpretation of these facts is by no means clear. Many historians of childhood argue that the meaning of these cultural developments is that parents were now taking their children more seriously and were more attached to them, because child mortality rates were falling and they could afford to invest themselves emotionally, so to speak, in their children. Others argue that childhood socialization took on an unprecedented severity in this period as a result of the new belief that children were especially impressionable. I leave it to historians of childhood to argue about whether or not parents really loved their children in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the absence of literary evidence to the contrary. That maternal sentiments were being newly recorded in the eighteenth century is undeniable—and this obviously contributes to the gestalt sometimes interpreted by cultural historians as a new interest in children and in childhood in general. My own position on this question is that of course parents of earlier periods loved their children, despite the perpetual anxiety and painful loss incurred by illness and the deaths of half of the children before they were five. It seems to me probable that what appears to us as increased parental concern for children in the eighteenth century is simply an artifact of the penetration of print culture into domestic life, in the form of diaries, memoirs, conduct books, and children’s literature. Linda Pollock, in her excellent assessment of this literature, remarks acutely that what seems like increased interest in the *abstract* nature of childhood and in the methods used to socialize children might simply be increased “expertise with writing as a form of communication” rather than “any significant transformations in the parent-child relationship” (*Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* [Cambridge, 1983] p. 269).

<sup>2</sup>See Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore, 1989), chap. 9, especially pp. 205–12, as well as her “‘Savage’ Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1991), in press.

<sup>3</sup>The construction of women *primarily* as caretaking mothers was suggested as early as 1978 by Randolph Trumbach in *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*, although he interpreted this cultural shift as an advance for women. Ludmilla J. Jordanova in “Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality,” in Carol P. McCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Gender* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 42–70, makes the enormously suggestive remark that “links between women, motherhood, the family and natural morality may help to explain the emphasis on the breast in much medical literature” (p. 49). What follows in this paper is a gloss on this observation. Valerie Fildes has done the definitive work on the history of breast-feeding and wet-nursing in England during this period. See her *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh, 1986) and *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 1988). Susan Staves explained the enormous popularity of John Home’s *Douglas*, first produced in 1756, as evidence of the new English interest in motherhood in the middle of the eighteenth century. See her “Douglas’s Mother” in *Brandeis Essays*

I want to analyze one strand of this highly complex social phenomenon and to argue that motherhood was a colonial form—the domestic, familial counterpart to land enclosure at home and imperialism abroad. Motherhood as it was constructed in the early modern period is a production-gearred phenomenon analogous to the capitalizing of agriculture, the industrializing of manufacture, and the institutionalizing of the nation state. In other words, these rearrangements in the psychological constellation of the family—the invention of childhood and the invention of motherhood—can be seen as adaptations of an existing social system to the new political and economic imperatives of an expanding English empire. The heady new belief in the rational manipulation of natural forces for greater productivity—whether in manufacture or in agriculture—can be traced in the operations of the family as well as in breeding cattle or in spinning cotton.

Eventually, as Anna Davin has argued crucially, the production of children for the nation and for the empire constituted childbearing women as a national resource.<sup>4</sup> Already in the eighteenth century there is some evidence of a growing demographic consciousness on the part of a nation in the process of industrializing and building an empire. More people were needed to keep up with the commercial and military interests of the state—more Englishmen were needed to man the factories, sail the ships, defend the seas, and populate the colonies. A petition presented to the House of

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*in Literature*, ed. John Hazel Smith (Waltham, MA, 1983), pp. 51–67. Three pioneering articles about this new ideological dimension to the social construction of mid-eighteenth-century womanhood are Ruth Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815,” *Feminist Studies* 4 (1978): 101–26; Mitzi Myers, “Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children’s Books,” *Children’s Literature* 14 (1986): 31–59; and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Home Economics: Domestic Ideology in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda*,” *Eighteenth Century* 29 (1988): 242–62. Nancy Armstrong describes this social phenomenon similarly but values it differently. She argues that this emerging definition of womanhood empowered women insofar as it created a new domain over which they were granted authority: “the use of leisure time, the ordinary care of the body, courtship practices, the operations of desire, the forms of pleasure, gender differences, and family relations.” See her *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York, 1987), pp. 26–27. That women were in turn defined and constrained by this discourse seems to her an inevitable constitutive dimension of this new power. For French materials on motherhood, breast-feeding, and wet-nursing, see Elizabeth Baidinter, *Mother Love: The Myth of Motherhood, an Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (New York, 1981); George D. Sussman, *Selling Mother’s Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France 1715–1914* (Urbana, IL, 1982), and Mary Jacobus, “Incorruptible Milk: Breast-feeding and the French Revolution” (paper circulated at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Harvard University, Spring 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” *History Workshop* 5 (1978): 9–65. Today, in contemporary debates about abortion, spokespersons on both sides of the issue—moral philosophers, legislators, and lawyers alike—refer unhesitatingly to the “state’s interest in life.”

Commons on March 10, 1756, asking for increased funds for London's Foundling Hospital shows evidence of this growing awareness. It argued that the country needed more troops for national defense and that it was in the national interest to save the lives of these abandoned children. Drafted by members of the board of governors of the Foundling Hospital, the petition pointed out that it was more cost-effective to save this native population than to hire mercenary soldiers, as had been so recently necessary to defend against a threatened invasion from France.

This connection between England's population needs and its evolving national identity as a commercial empire is patterned in the interests of the Foundling Hospital's chief administrator in 1756, Jonas Hanway.<sup>5</sup> Lifelong campaigner for the rights of abandoned children—and a member of the commercial Russia Company—Hanway made explicit the connection between England's expanding colonial power and its need for more citizens. His instrumental reason for saving the lives of English orphans was linked to his vision of the imperial destiny of England. "Increase alone," he wrote, "can make our *natural* Strength in *Men* correspond with our *artificial* Power in *Riches*, and both with the Grandeur and Extent of the *British Empire*."<sup>6</sup> Author of a history of the Caspian trade, of conduct books for women, and of treatises arguing for the Foundling Hospital, he had a financial stake in the Russia Company's brisk trade in raw silk for English wool and an emotional stake in socializing women to their proper stations, as well as in protecting abandoned children.<sup>7</sup> For him, national interest and morality alike urged that every effort be made to stop the appalling waste of infant life. More hands were needed to hold muskets, weave cloth, and people the empire. The "preservation of deserted children" was a patriotic duty, a cause "wherein morals, politics, and the noblest passions of the human soul, meet in a more harmonious concord."<sup>8</sup>

Hanway was governor of the London Foundling Hospital in 1756, on the eve of the Seven Years' War, when England was arming and anxious about having enough troops for the impending crisis. In this rising war

<sup>5</sup>See James Stephen Taylor, "Philanthropy and Empire: Jonas Hanway and the Infant Poor of London," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 12 (1979): 285–306.

<sup>6</sup>Jonas Hanway, *Serious Considerations on the Salutary Design of the Act of Parliament for a Regular, Uniform Register of the Parish-Poor* (London, 1762), p. 26, quoted in Taylor, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup>Hanway's *Midnight the Signal: In Sixteen Letters to a Lady of Quality* (London, 1779) was a conduct book for gentlewomen, ostensibly the letters from a gentleman to his ward, inveighing against the dangers of keeping late hours and other bad habits of people of fashion. He also wrote a conduct book for servant women called *Advice from a Farmer to His Daughter in a Series of Discourses, Calculated to Promote the Welfare and True Interest of Servants*, 3 vols. (London, 1770), printed with a fascinating frontispiece that visually integrates the issues of gender roles, trade, government, religion, and agriculture.

<sup>8</sup>*Letters to the Guardians of the Infant Poor to Be Appointed by the Act of the Last Session of Parliament* (London, 1767), p. viii, quoted in Taylor, p. 293.

fever, the Foundling Hospital was reconceptualized by Hanway—and by Parliament—as a national resource for replenishing a population sure to be decimated in the coming conflict. The government rallied to save the lives of English infants and voted almost unlimited appropriations to the Foundling Hospital to establish a national network of rescue and care for abandoned children. All abandoned infants of a specified age (at first two months or younger, later six months, and then twelve months) were to be admitted to the hospital for medical attention and subsequently placed in the homes of wet nurses. The Foundling Hospital paid these women for their services and set up a system of inspection to evaluate their work and its results. Thousands of women were mobilized as surrogate mothers in this way, hired to play their unique part in the war effort.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually Hanway came to feel that this national effort to conserve infants for the state was ill-advised; the costs were exorbitant, and the waste of infant life was still very high. There were those, too, who felt that national revenues were being badly misspent in supporting these superfluous “bastards.” In 1760, four years after the experiment had been initiated, the Foundling Hospital closed its doors to all but the foundlings of London, its mandate—and its budget—shrunk to a municipal service. According to James Stephen Taylor, “The last Parliamentary subsidy was paid in 1771; in sixteen years Parliament had expended over £500,000 to support some 15,000 children.”<sup>10</sup>

The lesson learned by all concerned in this project was that commodification of motherhood on such a massive scale was too expensive. The nation simply could not—or would not—pay for maternal care on an individual basis. Even at £15 a year per woman, less than half of what a skilled (male) laborer might earn, the cost of subsidizing maternal care for unwanted children was greater than the national government was willing to pay. After a brief utopian attempt, this element of reproductive service was returned decisively to the private sphere. This episode is one chapter in the ideological appropriation of women as unpaid mothers for the nation. By the end of the century, even Mary Wollstonecraft seemed to believe that a woman’s claim to citizenship depended on her willingness to “mother.” Though she were faithful to her husband, Wollstonecraft wrote in 1792, the woman who “neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife, and has no right to that of a citizen.”<sup>11</sup>

Henry Abelove, writing playfully but seriously about the population explosion in England during the late eighteenth century, has suggested that

<sup>9</sup>Fildes, *Wet Nursing*, pp. 174–87.

<sup>10</sup>Taylor, p. 293.

<sup>11</sup>Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, vol. 5 of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (New York, 1989), p. 217.

this demographic bulge was an effect of a new instrumentality characteristic of heterosexual relations—as of all other human behaviors. An increasingly utilitarian attitude toward human life and human production dictated that “nonproductive” forms of sexuality were increasingly displaced and devalued during this period, replaced by a single standard of sexual activity.<sup>12</sup> That the concept of bourgeois motherhood was essential to this productive view of heterosexual relations seems to me obvious. I want to argue that motherhood, that centrally important sentimental trope of late eighteenth-century English literature, effected the colonization of women for heterosexual productive relations. Following Joan Kelly’s suggestion that sexual freedom is one index of women’s power in other historical periods,<sup>13</sup> it is important to note that motherhood functioned in this period to repress women’s active sexuality. This is not to assert that women’s sexuality ever was encouraged culturally, although in earlier periods it was expected. Indeed, it could be argued that the image of women as sexually active was as much a cultural construction as the subsequent image of women as pure and sexless and served in its own way the male appropriation of female sexual and reproductive services. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in the eighteenth century, maternity came to be imagined as a counter to sexual feeling, opposing alike individual expression, desire, and agency in favor of a mother-self at the service of the family and the state. This change, represented in both physiological and psychological terms, would seem to be a paradox—the asexual mother, a contradiction in terms. Even today these categories, the “sexual” and the “maternal,” function as mutually exclusive descriptive attributes, a formation that feminist intellectuals have puzzled over.<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to establish how this shift in the social construction of women’s essential nature meshed with other changes in English social identities. All I can do here is

<sup>12</sup>Henry Abelove, “Some Speculations on the History of Sexual Intercourse during the Long Eighteenth Century in England,” *Genders* 6 (November 1989): 125–31.

<sup>13</sup>Joan Kelly, “The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women’s History,” in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 1–19.

<sup>14</sup>Contemporary feminist theorists explain the fact that the “sexual” and the “maternal” are constituted as mutually exclusive categories as an effect of women’s exclusive care of children. See Susan Weisskopf Contratto, “Maternal Sexuality and Asexual Motherhood,” in *Women: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Catharine Stimpson and Ethel Person (Chicago, 1980), pp. 225–40. In accounting for the complex interactions between parenting and sexuality and how they affect the power relations between men and women, Ann Ferguson posits a system for the production and socialization of children that she calls sex/affective production, analogous to the economic production of material goods. See Ann Ferguson, “On Conceiving Motherhood and Sexuality: A Feminist Approach,” in *Mothering*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, NJ, 1983), pp. 153–82, and *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Male Dominance* (London, 1989).

locate one dimension of this change and connect it to the observations of other literary and cultural historians.

### SEXUALITY

Students of eighteenth-century British fiction are often struck by the difference between the women imaginatively portrayed in the fiction of the earlier part of the century and the women imagined in the fiction of the latter half of the century.<sup>15</sup> The rakish heroines of Restoration drama, the self-advertising amorous adventurers of the love-and-intrigue novels of Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Eliza Haywood, and the freewheeling protagonists of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* stand on one side of this cultural divide, while on the other side are those latter-day paragons of virtue, Evelina, Sidney Bidulph, and Emmeline, as well as Samuel Richardson's heroines—Pamela, Clarissa, and Harriet Byron—each one arguably more sexually repressed and sexually repressive than the one before.<sup>16</sup> This progressive desexualization of fictional heroines is further illustrated and amplified by an array of unrelenting plots punishing fictional women for what was rapidly becoming improper—and tragic—sexual behavior. Such characters as Sarah Fielding's adulterous Lady Dellwyn, Mrs. Inchbald's rebellious Miss Milner, Amelia Opie's convention-flouting Adeline Mowbray, or Mary Wollstonecraft's courageous and freethinking Maria are all severely punished in their respective texts for taking liberties with society's rules about female chastity.

Conduct literature, of course, since the seventeenth century had consistently counseled women against sexual flirtation—before or after marriage. I am not referring to prescriptive literature, however, but to fictional representations of women. In the earlier period, women's desire and sexual agency were portrayed in fiction with a tolerance, and even enjoyment, inconceivable in the later period. The rehabilitated prostitutes in John Dunton's series, *The Nightwalker* (1696–97),<sup>17</sup> or Aphra Behn's play, *The*

<sup>15</sup>See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 161–73; Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1986), especially chaps. 2 and 4; and Rosalind Ballaster, "Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction 1680–1740" (paper presented at Warren House Feminist Colloquium, February 24, 1989, Harvard University).

<sup>16</sup>Evelina, Sidney Bidulph, and Emmeline are the eponymous heroines of novels by Frances Burney, Frances Sheridan, and Charlotte Smith.

<sup>17</sup>For an argument about the positive literary construction of the women interviewed in John Dunton's *The Nightwalker*, see Shawn L. Maurer's "Reforming Men: The Construction of 'Chaste Heterosexuality' in the Early English Periodical," in *Historicizing Gender*, ed. Beth Fowkes Tobin (Urbana, IL), in press. Maurer points out that while Dunton's narrator begins by wanting to reform the nightwalking women whom he systematically ferrets out and interviews, he ends by documenting the repetitive detail of male sexual aggression and exploitation and female sexual victimization in their stories.



*Rover* (1677), for example, have no real counterparts in the fiction of the later period.<sup>18</sup> After about 1740, sexually promiscuous women—or even just lusty women—are never center-stage protagonists again, although they might be part of a colorful supporting cast. As Jane Spencer says, “In the typical woman’s novel in the second half of the century, there may be a seduced woman but the heroine herself remains pure.”<sup>19</sup>

Robert Bage was one late eighteenth-century author—a feminist of sorts—who several times portrayed a woman who had had a sexual mishap of one sort or another but who, though no longer a virgin, nevertheless went on to work or marry and live respectably.<sup>20</sup> Sir Walter Scott criticized this “dangerous tendency to slacken the reins of discipline” in an otherwise laudatory memoir of Bage. He noted that a number of respected authors—Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett among them—“treated with great lightness those breaches of morals, which are too commonly considered as venial in the male sex.” But Bage, he complained, “has extended, in some instances, that license to females, and seems at times even to sport with the ties of marriage.”<sup>21</sup>

An anecdote in Scott’s biography gives further evidence for a shift in cultural assumptions about women’s sexuality in the course of the eighteenth century. To illustrate how changes in taste take place “insensibly without the parties being aware of it,” Scott described the experience of his great-aunt reading Aphra Behn after an interval of sixty years. It seems that this woman, Mrs. Keith of Ravelstone, “a person of some condition” who “lived with unabated vigour of intellect to a very advanced age” and enjoyed reading “to the last of her long life,” asked to borrow some novels by Aphra Behn from her literary nephew, for she remembered being much interested in Behn in her youth. When she perused the borrowed volumes, however, she was offended by the manners and language of the work and returned them to her nephew with the cheerful suggestion that he burn them. But she remarked at the same time: “Is it not a very odd thing that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel myself ashamed to read a book which, sixty years ago, I have heard read aloud for the amusement of large circles, consisting of the first and most creditable society in London?”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>For instance, Sukey Jones in Clara Reeve’s *The Two Mentors* (1783) is betrayed into one sexual adventure but quickly repents and reforms; the heroine’s mother in Robert Bage’s *Mount Henneth* (1781) is raped by infidels. Neither participates in illicit sexual encounters of her own volition or out of sexual desire, as do the heroines of earlier texts.

<sup>19</sup>Spencer, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup>See n. 18 above.

<sup>21</sup>Sir Walter Scott, “Prefatory Memoir to Robert Bage,” in Ballantyne’s *Novelist’s Library*, 10 vols. (London, 1821–24), 9:xxvii.

<sup>22</sup>J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1848), pp. 390–91.

Thomas Laqueur has explained this cultural reconsideration of the nature of women's sexuality as part of a process establishing women's essential biological difference from men in a revolutionary context committed to sweeping clean all *socially* determined differences among people. In the context of late eighteenth-century revolutionary claims for equality between rich and poor, aristocrats and workers, men and women, the physiological differences between male and female had to be reinvented, so to speak, to offset potentially subversive claims women might make for political equality. Thus, the reexamination of women's bodies and their sexual subject position was an attempt to establish women's biological difference from men, including the possibility that women's desire—unlike men's desire—was not biologically necessary to reproduction and not “natural.”<sup>23</sup>

The most striking aspect of this reinterpretation of the experiences of male and female bodies was the growing certainty on the part of the medical establishment that the female orgasm—or any other manifestation of women's sexual pleasure—was irrelevant to reproduction. Since male ejaculation was known to be essential for conception, the logic of physiological analogy had indicated that a female climax was also necessary for procreation—and medical authorities had always assumed women's symmetrical physiological response whenever conception took place. One appalling consequence of this assumption had been that if a raped woman became pregnant, her assailant could be acquitted on the grounds that her pregnancy proved her pleasure and hence her consent.<sup>24</sup> Once reproduction was recognized to be independent of women's sexual pleasure, however, the existence of women's active desire became a matter of debate.<sup>25</sup> Historically women had been perceived as lascivious and lustful creatures, fallen daughters of Eve, corrupting and corrupted.<sup>26</sup> But by the middle of the eighteenth century they were increasingly reimagined as belonging to an-

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Laqueur, “Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology,” *Representations* 14 (1986): 1–41.

<sup>24</sup>Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton, 1987), p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>Sometime around 1761, a liberal clergyman named Robert Wallace noted in his text “Of Venery” that “by a false, unnecessary, and unnatural refinement some would deny that there is any lust in modest women and virgins.” He asserted that contrary to popular opinion, “every woman during certain seasons and a certain period of life is incited to lust” (Norah Smith, “Sexual Mores in the Eighteenth Century: Robert Wallace’s ‘Of Venery,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978): 419–35). That Wallace’s point of view was a minority opinion by 1761, which he strenuously urged against a prevailing belief in women’s “passionlessness,” highlights the shift in cultural attitudes toward women’s sexuality. For an analysis of “passionlessness” as it was fostered by conduct literature and by evangelical religion, see Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology,” *Signs* 4 (1978): 219–36. I locate the transition somewhat earlier historically than Cott, but that might reflect the difference between an American and an English context.

<sup>26</sup>See Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA, 1975), pp. 124–51.

other order of being: loving but without sexual needs, morally pure, disinterested, benevolent, and self-sacrificing.<sup>27</sup>

The desexualization of women was accomplished, in part, by redefining them as maternal rather than sexual beings. It is this movement I want to focus on here—this double, interlocked, mutually exclusive relationship between sexuality and maternity as it was reconstructed in the middle of the eighteenth century. For in a remarkably short span, the maternal succeeded, supplanted, and repressed the sexual definition of women, who began to be reimagined as nurturing rather than desiring, as supportive rather than appetitive.

### MATERNITY

Motherhood has not always carried with it associations of tenderness and unstinting nurture. Nor has it always been interpreted as a woman's ultimate fulfillment. According to Linda Pollock, until 1750 or so, pregnancy was treated as if it were a disease, an abnormal condition. Expectant mothers, for example, were bled when they felt unwell, like any other sick person.<sup>28</sup> The fact that women stopped menstruating during pregnancy was seen as a medical problem insofar as it left them without a regular purgative cycle; they had no outlet for "noxious humours," no way to void accumulated impurities.<sup>29</sup> But pregnancy was not yet really of much interest to the medical establishment. The texts that created the body of opinion about pregnancy and maternity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not medical but, rather, religious and legal. This discourse was designed to provide guidance on legal questions about marriage, legitimacy, and inheritance, and women were represented as disorderly and unruly beings whose sexuality needed to be controlled so that they would bear only legitimate children.<sup>30</sup> Herbal recipes and medical advice about what to expect during pregnancy or lying-in were directed not toward mothers but toward midwives, nurses, and medical practitioners.<sup>31</sup> Nor was this medical literature privileged: parents often as not rejected the advice of printed texts in favor of family lore and local customs.<sup>32</sup> Few detailed suggestions about the technique of breast-feeding—how to care for

<sup>27</sup>For an exploration of this phenomenon in the American context see Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13 (1987): 37–58.

<sup>28</sup>Linda Pollock, *A Lasting Relationship* (Hanover, NH, 1987), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup>Linda Pollock, "Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early-Modern Society," in Valerie Fildes, ed., *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1990), pp. 39–68, 59.

<sup>30</sup>Patricia Crawford, "The Construction and Experience of Maternity," in Fildes, ed., p. 6.

<sup>31</sup>Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, p. 116.

<sup>32</sup>Pollock, "Embarking on a Rough Passage," in Fildes, ed., p. 59.

breasts and nipples, how often to feed an infant, how to hold the child, or when to put it to breast—can be found in this literature at all. Women were expected to learn these things from other women in a tradition of oral advice and lore. Motherhood was not yet the object of cultural control, and women were expected to muddle through it as best they could.<sup>33</sup>

By the middle of the century, however, motherhood became the focus of a new kind of cultural attention. Writers began to wax sentimental about maternity, to accord it high moral stature, and to construct it as noble, strong, and self-sacrificial. Admiration for mothers—and for maternal devotion—came to be a banner under which the newly constituted middle class marched. In literature, maternal sentiment began to emerge as an emotional force capable of moving a reading public, understood as the sign of an innately moral and uniquely female sensibility. In analyzing the power and popularity of John Home's famous tragedy, *Douglas* (1756), Susan Staves has argued that its success was due to the way it handled maternity, at that time a new cultural obsession. What was original in the play, particularly noted and appreciated by contemporary audiences, she says, was Home's "attempt to articulate and dramatize what was in 1756 a new sentiment: elaborated tenderness between mothers and children."<sup>34</sup>

Natural but learned, instinctive but also evidence of the most exquisitely refined sensibility, motherhood was celebrated in prose and poetry while medical men set about to advise women on dress, diet, and care for their children. Both scientists and moralists suddenly had a great deal to say about how women ought to behave as mothers. A complicated print culture arose, illuminating the evolving conception of motherhood—most of it directed at the women themselves, telling them how to act and how to feel.<sup>35</sup> Hugh Downman's poem, *Infancy; or, The Management of Children, a Didactic Poem in Six Books* (1774), is a good example of the popularity of this subject and of the way in which medical experts came to dominate the discourse. Downman himself was a physician, practicing in Exeter. His extremely popular poem, a repository in blank verse of the standard English attitudes toward motherhood in this period, went through at least seven editions by 1809. Being a doctor gave Downman special authority to pronounce on this subject, for motherhood was increasingly understood to be the province of the male medical establishment. Biologically grounded, a relationship "based in nature," motherhood was the outcome of a knowable physiological process. Maternal feeling, as the medical establishment increasingly made clear, was biologically determined; women who lacked it

<sup>33</sup>Patricia Crawford, "The Sucking Child: Adult Attitudes to Child Care in the First Year of Life in Seventeenth-Century England," *Continuity and Change* 1 (1986): 26–51, 30, 42; Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>34</sup>Staves (n. 3 above), p. 53.

<sup>35</sup>Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, p. 116.

were abnormal. “Is there a stronger principle infix’d / In Human Nature, than the zealous warmth / A Mother t’ward her Infant feels?” asked Downman rhetorically.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, recall Alexander Pope’s slanderous portrait of the novelist Eliza Haywood in *The Dunciad* as a sluttish mother (“Two babes of love close clinging to her waist”), heavily and even brutishly physical (“With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes”).<sup>37</sup> These images clearly belong to an earlier period, before motherhood sanctified women and removed from them the taint of sexuality. Pope’s images suggest a loose and instinctive sensuality—with nothing of the moral consciousness attributed to mothers later in the century. Such bovine sexual energy as Pope represented was fast disappearing from the cultural landscape by the 1760s, repressed as a motive in fictional heroines and antiheroines alike. Newer “feminine” sentiments were being elicited and demonstrated by the novels of the age—sentiments connected with maternity, such as pity, tenderness, and benevolence. Increasingly constructed as the higher good for which a woman must be prepared to sacrifice her sexual vanity, motherhood began to carry with it the suggestion of punitive consequences for sexual activity. If fictional women characters of the previous era had mated and bred casually—like Moll Flanders—maternity was now becoming a serious duty and responsibility.

The valorization of motherhood as it played into the domestication of Englishwomen in the late eighteenth century has been treated positively for the most part by cultural historians. Nancy Armstrong, for example, has argued that the cultural discourse of novels and conduct books created a new domestic domain over which women exercised authority as they were, in turn, constructed by this discourse.<sup>38</sup> More than a decade ago, Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex, and Marriage* claimed that this period witnessed the emergence of “companionate marriage” and argued that women’s new role as their husbands’ companions elevated women to a higher status within society. But companionate marriage is also interpretable as a more thoroughgoing psychological appropriation of women to serve the emo-

<sup>36</sup>Hugh Downman, *Infancy; or, The Management of Children, a Didactic Poem in Six Books* (London, 1774), bk. 2, lines 298–300.

<sup>37</sup>*The Dunciad* (London, 1728), bk. 2, lines 150, 156.

<sup>38</sup>See n. 3 above. Ann Ferguson’s concept of a sex/affective production system is useful here. She argues that one needs to understand the social mechanisms for the production of “key human needs—sexuality, nurturance, children—whose satisfaction is just as basic to the functioning of human society as is the satisfaction of the material needs of hunger and physical security.” Using this concept, one might describe the changes in families and social relations in eighteenth-century English society as changes in women’s role in the sex/affective production system—changes in the arrangements society made for the satisfaction of sexual needs, needs for nurturance, and the care and socialization of children. See Ferguson, *Blood at the Root*, p. 83.

tional needs of men than ever was imagined in earlier divisions of labor by gender. Educating women to be more interesting companions for men rather than as individuals with their own economic or intellectual purposes is an ambiguous advance, not one that moves very far along the path toward equality. The bluestockings' achievement is usually represented in this light—as the ability to attract men to intellectual salons, to keep them at home in domestic space and out of the bachelor atmosphere of coffeehouses and taverns.<sup>39</sup> This reappropriation of female subjectivity for the sake of a new cultural discourse, which separated public from private, political from personal, and market relations from domestic relations, was a colonization of women far more thoroughgoing than any that had preceded it.

#### BREAST-FEEDING

As the processes associated with childbearing became the focus for a new cultural appropriation, the maternal rather than the sexual purposes of women's bodies were increasingly foregrounded in medical literature. Medical treatises multiplied on the subject of maternal breast-feeding, urging women to nurse their own children for a variety of medical, social, and psychological reasons. This outpouring was a novel phenomenon, created both by the existence of a print culture and by a seismic shift in cultural conceptions of family. Nothing like it existed earlier. The medical establishment seemed determined to convince women to nurse their own children—for their own sakes, for the health of their children, and often for the good of the nation.<sup>40</sup> The tone of the treatises was admonitory, with moral exhortations mixed in among the physiological descriptions and sci-

<sup>39</sup>Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle* (Oxford, 1990), corrects this misapprehension definitively, documenting the achievements of bluestockings as intellectuals and writers.

<sup>40</sup>A partial list of the treatises consulted follows: Nicholas Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives: or, a Guide for Women, in Their Conception, Bearing, and Suckling Their Children* (London, 1651); John Maubray, *The Female Physician, Containing All the Diseases Incident to That Sex, in Virgins, Wives, and Widows* (London, 1724); William Cadogan, *An Essay upon Nursing, and the Management of Children, from Their Birth to Three Years of Age* (London, 1748); John Theobald, *A Young Wife's Guide, in the Management of Her Children* (London, 1764); Hugh Smith, *Letters to Married Women* (London, 1767); George Armstrong, *An Essay on the Diseases Most Fatal to Infants, including Rules to Be Observed in the Nursing of Children, with a Particular View to Those Who Are Brought Up by Hand* (London, 1767); William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers, on the Subject of Their Own Health, and on the Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty, of Their Offspring* (London, 1769); William Moss, *An Essay on the Management, Nursing, and Diseases of Children, from the Birth: And on the Treatment and Diseases of Pregnant and Lying-in Women* (London, 1781); Michael Underwood, *A Treatise on the Diseases of Children, Part the Second: Containing Familiar Directions Adapted to the Nursery and the General Management of Infants from the Birth* (London, 1784).

entific explanations. Many followed Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), castigating women as selfish, callous, and unnatural who would not give themselves the trouble to nurse or waxing sentimental and voyeuristic at descriptions of lovely mothers suckling their infants. "Let not husbands be deceived: let them not expect attachment from wives, who, in neglecting to suckle their children, rend asunder the strongest ties in nature," warned William Buchan in his 1769 *Advice to Mothers*. No woman who was not able to nurse should breed; if she could not "discharge the duties of a mother . . . she has no right to become a wife."<sup>41</sup> Hugh Smith assured his women readers in 1767 that they would lose nothing by nursing. "O! That I could prevail upon my fair countrywomen to become still more lovely in the sight of men! Believe it not, when it is insinuated, that your bosoms are less charming, for having a dear little cherub at your breast."<sup>42</sup> Even Mary Wollstonecraft echoed this promise of domestic devotion when she recommended maternal nursing in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

Cold would be the heart of a husband, were he not rendered unnatural by early debauchery, who did not feel more delight at seeing his child suckled by its mother, than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise; yet this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie . . . wealth leads women to spurn. To preserve their beauty, and wear the flowery crown of the day, which gives them a kind of right to reign for a short time over the sex, they neglect to stamp impressions on their husbands' hearts that would be remembered with more tenderness when the snow on the head began to chill the bosom, than even their virgin charms.<sup>43</sup>

Wollstonecraft reinscribes here the mutually exclusive nature of sexuality and maternity, the choice women were expected to make between trying to hold their husbands with "wanton tricks" or with the spectacle of suckling an infant—a sight to which only the most debauched of men failed to respond. Yet women of means were still choosing to hire wet nurses, choosing the ephemeral "flowery crown of the day" rather than the more "natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie." For both were not possible: either one stamped lasting impressions on a husband's heart with the image of one's maternal devotion and self-sacrifice or with one's "virgin charms," one's sexual attractions. The former was natural, appealing to all but the most degraded tastes, while the latter was "wanton" and unnaturally sexualized.

By the time Wollstonecraft wrote this passage, sentimental exhortations

<sup>41</sup>Buchan, pp. 217–18.

<sup>42</sup>Smith, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup>Wollstonecraft (n. 11 above), p. 213.

like hers had been appearing since the middle of the century, together with an increasing number of fictional representations of model maternal behavior and medical arguments for the “scientific” benefits of maternal breast-feeding. This discourse—in conduct books, novels, magazine essays and stories, children’s books, and medical treatises—erupting as it did in the middle of the eighteenth century is testimony to the intensifying cultural significance of motherhood. The medical focus on maternal breast-feeding can be interpreted as the beginning of the physiological colonization of women’s bodies corresponding to the psychological colonization of women’s subjectivity in both companionate marriage and motherhood.

The locus—both symbolic and real—of this new appropriation of women’s bodies for motherhood and for the state was the maternal breast. Distinctions between fathers’ and mothers’ parental roles, as well as male expertise about women’s reproductive capacities and bodily processes, were joined here. It was as if this organ became the site of the struggle over the maternal definition of women, staged in opposition to the sexual definition of women. Increasingly, as the second half of the century unfolded, maternal breast-feeding became a moral and a medical imperative for women of all classes.

The cultural climate surrounding childbearing and breast-feeding had been noticeably different in the previous century. Not only had there been little prescriptive literature on the subject, as I have noted, but that little was directed not at mothers but at midwives and medical practitioners. Wet-nursing was so widespread in England, taken so much for granted in the seventeenth century, that aside from a few eccentric exhortations to mothers to nurse their own children, the controversy about breast-feeding focused not on who nursed the child (a wet nurse or a birth mother) but on whether or not breast-feeding was preferable to artificial feeding. According to Valerie Fildes, there was a fad during the last quarter of the seventeenth century in England among aristocrats for bypassing nursing altogether, a “radical change in ideas and practice of infant feeding among some of the wealthier classes.”<sup>44</sup> Medical experts of that period advocated raising infants “by hand” or “dry-feeding” them, which meant eschewing breast milk altogether and feeding them water or milk gruels made with breadcrumbs, sugar, and sometimes butter or other forms of grease. This lethal practice was encouraged by James II, who, on the advice of his royal physicians in 1688, decided to dry-feed his heir in this manner. Apparently numbers of aristocrats followed suit, despite the ill success that attended this method of feeding.

<sup>44</sup>Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, p. 288. For a fuller discussion of this practice among the upper classes, see also pp. 106, 288–92. Trumbach (n. 1 above) also discusses this phenomenon, pp. 197–208.



This extraordinary medical advice must be understood as a backlash to what was in fact a very widespread practice of wet-nursing. For despite the peculiar desire of the wealthiest classes to raise their children “by hand,” English wet-nursing was at an all-time historical high in this period.<sup>45</sup> Mothers from a wide spectrum of classes—the wives of merchants, farmers, scholars, lawyers, physicians, and clergymen, as well as aristocrats and gentry—regularly hired wet nurses to breast-feed their newborns in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>46</sup> The aristocratic interest in raising infants “by hand” may have been motivated by a desire to distinguish their practices from those of the less wealthy classes, or by a shortage of wet nurses, or by a distaste for the lowborn women to whom they had to resort for this service. But it is noteworthy that dry-feeding had the sanction of “medical science” in this period and was considered to be the latest advance. What these phenomena demonstrate—both the enthusiasm for “dry-feeding” and the practice of hiring wet nurses—is that women’s sexual identity was not yet defined, independent of class, by their willingness to give themselves to their reproductive tasks. In 1689 Walter Harris lamented that “so many *Mothers*, not only of high Rank, but even of the common Sort, can with so much Inhumanity, and more than British Cruelty, desert their tender Offspring, and expose them to so many Dangers of mercenary Nurses.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1711 Richard Steele created a cranky male reader in one of his *Spectator* columns who complained that mothers of all ranks were delegating to wet nurses the task of breast-feeding their own children. He referred to the “general Argument, that a Mother is weakened by giving suck to her Children” and observed that it was a common excuse for hiring a wet nurse. “For if a Woman does but know that her Husband can spare about three or

<sup>45</sup>Fildes, *Wet Nursing* (n. 3 above), p. 79. For a contemporary satire on the aristocratic practice of bringing up a child “by hand” see Richard Steele, “On the Birth of an Heir,” *The Tatler*, no. 15 (May 12, 1709).

<sup>46</sup>Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, p. 99.

<sup>47</sup>Walter Harris, *A Treatise of the Acute Diseases of Infants*, trans. J. Martyn (London, 1689), pp. 18–19; quoted in Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Monster or Mother? Eighteenth-Century Medical Discourse on Maternal Breast Feeding” (paper presented at the meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Cincinnati, April 1987). The satiric author of an early eighteenth-century medical treatise blames both the fashionable mother and the mercenary, neglectful wet nurse in the scene he imagines in the wet nurse’s cottage, when the mother has been notified that her child is ill. “Down comes Madam the mother, furbulo’d, with an erect rump (crying and bellowing) and running about half mad, like a cow stung with a gad flie, and with her maid laden with pots, glasses, venice treacle, Goody Kent’s powder, goat-stone, black cherry-water, etc. And after her, easie, her husband with a coach and four, with, perhaps, a brace of doctors, or some famous child’s apothecary, etc.” (E. Baynard, *The History of Cold Bathing: Both Ancient and Modern, Part II* [London, 1706], pp. 149–50, quoted in Fildes, *Wet Nursing*, p. 93). The cowl-like attributes of this mother are meant to suggest that she ought to be nursing her own child.

six Shillings a Week extraordinary . . . she certainly, with the Assistance of her Gossips, will soon persuade the good Man to send the Child to Nurse . . . by pretending Indisposition.”<sup>48</sup> Steele’s description conjures up a picture of wet-nursing as a widespread service in England, available to those with even a small surplus. For that segment of the population with an extra three shillings a week or more—a proportion of the population one might call the middle class—breast-feeding moved, in the course of the century, from being paid labor to being unpaid reproductive labor. That is, if there is truth in Steele’s description, then women’s bodily services were commodified and purchased across class lines in the early part of the eighteenth century, while in the second half of the century, those services were redefined as the unpaid labor that women owed their husbands, their families, and even the state.

By 1784, a medical treatise on childhood diseases and the “general management of infants from the birth,” filled with self-congratulations to the enlightened age for “recent examples among persons of rank” of maternal nursing, observed that maternal breast-feeding had become by then a new social expectation for women. “That tyrant, Fashion,” remarked the author dryly, “has prevailed over the good sense and natural feelings of many whose maternal affections can be, in no other instance, suspected.”<sup>49</sup> By the 1770s and 1780s, then, breast-feeding was no longer being determined by class but by gender. “That tyrant, Fashion” had changed the way women conceived of their roles as mothers. A historian, using information in diaries, claims that 67 percent of mothers in the eighteenth century breast-fed their own infants as compared to only 43 percent in the seventeenth century, a proportion of breast-feeding mothers never equaled before or since.<sup>50</sup> No longer was nursing considered quite so detachable a bodily service, available for wealthier women to hire from poorer women in order to spare themselves and make their lives easier. By the end of the eighteenth century, this bodily service came to be constructed as part of all women’s unpaid reproductive labor.

A comparison of Steele’s discussion of breast-feeding in *The Spectator* with later discussions of the subject when it became the vogue shows how unsentimental a tone he took about motherhood and maternal nursing in the early part of the century. Females ought to nurse because it was their duty to sustain what they brought forth, as “the Earth is called the Mother of all Things, not because she produces, but because she maintains and nurses what she produces.” Steele did not argue the naturalness of tender

<sup>48</sup>*The Spectator*, no. 246 (December 12, 1711).

<sup>49</sup>Underwood, p. 173.

<sup>50</sup>Pollock, *Forgotten Children* (n. 1 above), p. 215. According to Susan Contratto (n. 14 above), as recently as 1980 in the United States “fewer than 25 percent of all newborns [were] nursed, even for the five days of the usual hospital stay” (p. 236).

maternal feelings, the advantages in nursing of establishing a deep and primal bond of love between mother and child, or the peculiar suitability of women for the office of mothering; these beliefs came later. He concentrated instead on the character of the nurse and argued that mothers should not hand over their infants to “a Woman that is (ten thousand to one) neither . . . sound in Mind nor Body, that has neither Honour nor Reputation, neither Love nor Pity for the poor Babe, but more Regard for the Money than for the whole Child.”<sup>51</sup>

Steele’s class-based objection to wet-nursing is characteristic of the earlier period: an unsuitable dependence on women of another class and a revulsion from those commonly hired to do that work—coarse country breeders or unwed mothers. With phrases that go back at least to Nicholas Culpeper’s 1651 treatise on midwifery, Steele’s cranky gentleman asked whether a child sent out to nurse might not “imbibe the gross Humours and Qualities of the Nurse, like a Plant in a different Ground, or like a Graft upon a different Stock? Do we not observe, that a Lamb sucking a Goat changes very much its Nature, nay even its Skin and Wooll into the Goat Kind?”<sup>52</sup> In this view, women were not all alike; their milk was not interchangeable. Class was still a more important determinant in this most intimate of matters than biological sex.<sup>53</sup>

Mary Astell’s incidental reference to wet-nursing is another example of this class-based argument in the late seventeenth century. In her 1694 *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* she argued for maternal breast-feeding as a check on aristocratic pride rather than as a medically superior practice or an act of solidarity with working-class women. She enjoined those upper-class women to whom she always addressed herself, “how *Great* soever they are,” not to “think themselves too *Good* to perform what Nature requires, nor thro’ Pride and Delicacy remit the poor little one to the care of a Foster Parent. Or, if necessity enforce them to depute another to perform their Duty, they would be as choice at least in the Manners and Inclinations, as they are in the complexions of their Nurses, least with their Milk they

<sup>51</sup>*The Spectator*, no. 246 (December 12, 1711).

<sup>52</sup>These phrases are repeated in the 1794 treatise written by the man-midwife John Maubray (n. 40 above), p. 329.

<sup>53</sup>No one save the Countess of Lincoln in the seventeenth century seemed aware of the other implication of a class-based system of wet-nursing: that the child of the wet nurse might starve. “Bee not necessary to that disorder of causing a poorer woman to banish her owne infant, for the entertaining of a richer womans child,” she wrote (original emphasis) (Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* [Oxford, 1622], p. 19, quoted in Crawford, “The Construction and Experience of Maternity” [n. 30 above], p. 24). Later in the eighteenth century, this concern can also be found in Michael Underwood’s treatise. In urging women to try nursing their own children before looking for a wet nurse to undertake that office, he refers to “the sacrifice that poor women make in going out to suckle other people’s children, the sad consequences of which are often severely felt by their own” (p. 174).

transfuse their Vices, and form in the Child such evil habits as will not easily be eradicated.”<sup>54</sup> Astell’s Christian asceticism, her cheerful belief in effort, and her invocation of “the natural” foreshadows later cultural attitudes about women’s “duty.” People should do whatever life required of them, and nursing one’s own children was one of those things. Following the medical practitioners of her time, Astell understood breast milk to be a bodily fluid, like blood, that carried and transmitted one’s essential nature. The class of one’s wet nurse mattered, for habits, vices, manners, and inclinations might be transmitted to the child along with maternal milk.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, these ideas had changed. Mothers no longer were reproached for the class of caretakers to whom they turned over their own flesh-and-blood but for mistakenly preferring their own independence of movement, social life, looks, or figures to the duties—and the joys—of motherhood. When William Cadogan published *An Essay upon Nursing, and the Management of Children, From Their Birth to Three Years of Age* in 1748, it was not to attack wet-nursing on the grounds of class difference. The vanity he attacked in mothers who hired wet nurses was not the vanity of class but the vanity of sexual attractiveness. He urged every woman to “prevail upon herself to give up a little of the Beauty of her Breast to feed her Offspring.” From the start, his language revealed that this maternal practice was defined in opposition to female sexual vanity and was expected to contain it. The tradeoff for “beauty” was a pleasanter domestic situation to offer one’s husband, a bourgeois vision of a happier home life. He pictured to men the pleasures of having their children at home rather than sent away to nurse and appealed to them to encourage rather than forbid this practice. “The Child, was it nurs’d in this way, would be always quiet, in good Humour, ever playing, laughing or sleeping. In my Opinion, a Man of Sense cannot have a prettier Rattle (for Rattles he must have of one kind or other) than such a young Child.”<sup>55</sup> Arguing for middle-class domestic values as a substitute for decadent aristocratic pursuits, Cadogan implied that maternal nursing was the key to a quiet moral revolution.

Since this extremely influential treatise marks the beginning of medical preoccupation with maternal breast-feeding, it is worth analyzing in some detail. Written to instruct the governors of the London Foundling Hospital and adopted as its official medical guidelines, Cadogan’s *Essay upon Nursing* went through at least eleven editions in French and English before the end of the century. As I have said, the class of wet nurses was not an issue for Cadogan; indeed, he took a sentimental liberal view of class: “That 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, and very

<sup>54</sup>Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (London, 1694), pp. 28–29.

<sup>55</sup>Cadogan, p. 24.

soon able to shift for itself; while the puny Insect, the Heir and Hope of a rich Family lies languishing under a Load of Finery, that overpowers his Limbs, abhorring and rejecting the Dainties he is crammed with, till he dies a Victim to the mistaken Care and Tenderness of his fond Mother.”<sup>56</sup>

What the enlightened doctor cared about in wet nurses was not class or morals but their condition as healthy animals. He recognized that there were cases in which it was necessary to engage wet nurses; there were families in which the birth mother was unable to nurse; moreover, wet nurses were needed to feed the hundreds of abandoned infants at the London Foundling Hospital. He advised selecting a woman who was between twenty and thirty years old and newly lactating, ideally having been delivered herself within two or three months. As with valued livestock, her diet was to be supervised: she was to be fed a “proper Mixture of Flesh and Vegetables . . . with a good deal of Garden Stuff, and Bread.” She was to be prohibited from drinking wine or strong liquors.<sup>57</sup>

“If we follow Nature,” asserted Cadogan, “instead of leading or driving it, we cannot err.” What he meant by nature in this context was “women’s nature,” whose “natural” characteristics consistently had revealed themselves to male physicians and not to “unlearned women” who blindly passed along the “Customs of their Great Grand-mothers” received in turn from “the Physicians of their unenlighten’d Days.”<sup>58</sup> One by one he dismantled the standard arguments for wet-nursing and other common practices in raising infants. The assertion that nursing was debilitating to women “too weak to bear such a Drain, which would rob them of their own Nourishment,” Cadogan disposed of with the observation that disease is caused not by “Want” but by “too great a Fulness and Redundancy of Humours.” Therefore, since nursing was purgative for both mother and child (the colostrum was thought to have a laxative effect on the newborn), its good effect for both was assured. He inveighed against “Herbs, Roots, and Drugs,” swaddling, “superstitious Practices and Ceremonies,” and feeding an infant more frequently than two or three times in twenty-four hours.<sup>59</sup> He assured his readers that if his plan were followed, it would reduce the terrible mortality of children. “Half of the People that come into the World, go out of it again before they become the least Use to it, or themselves,” he remonstrated. “Yet I cannot find, that any one Man of sense, and publick Spirit, has ever attended to it at all; notwithstanding the Maxim in every one’s Mouth, that a Multitude of Inhabitants is the greatest Strength and best Support of a Commonwealth.”<sup>60</sup> It was about time that “men of sense” took an interest in this national problem.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 14, 17.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

Cadogan was convinced that women needed to be reeducated by medical men like himself to recognize where their real duty lay. The “plain natural Plan I have laid down, is never followed,” he complained, “because most Mothers, of any Condition, either cannot, or will not undertake the troublesome Task of suckling their own Children.”<sup>61</sup> He asserted the need for male control of the process in order to set it on its “natural” track. “It is with great Pleasure I see at last the Preservation of Children become the Care of Men of Sense,” he wrote. “In my Opinion, this Business has been too long fatally left to the Management of Women who cannot be supposed to have proper knowledge to fit them for such a Task, notwithstanding they look upon it to be their own Province.”<sup>62</sup> He recommended that every father have his child suckled under his own eye and that he “make use of his own Reason and Sense in superintending and directing the Management of it.”<sup>63</sup> Although against dry-feeding in general, he believed that it was possible for a good physician to manage it properly but warned that it required “more Knowledge of Nature, and the animal Oeconomy, than the best Nurse was ever Mistress of.” He was confident that in time his plan would “convince most Nurses, Aunts, Grand-mothers etc. how much they have hitherto been in the wrong.”<sup>64</sup> Cadogan argued for the instruction of women by a male medical establishment for the sake of domestic quiet and family life. As a century earlier it was believed that women’s unruly and insatiable sexuality needed to be governed by men, so now it was believed that women needed bodily instruction in matters of childbearing. “Nor to the dictates plain of candid Truth / Thy antient Nurse’s doating saws prefer,” warned Hugh Downman’s *Infancy*.<sup>65</sup>

### CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

Representations of the breast and of maternal breast-feeding in the fiction of Samuel Richardson and others corroborate the historical periodization of this phenomenon that I have presented here and the shift in cultural attitudes toward it. Richardson’s *Clarissa* provides one of the most interesting examples of these changing attitudes about sexuality and maternity, as

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>65</sup>Downman (n. 36 above), bk. 2, lines 108–9. In 1781 William Moss (n. 40 above) warned against preferring the wisdom of wet nurses to the advice of physicians: “It is an opinion, very generally adopted, that the care and direction of women and children upon these occasions is most properly submitted to the management of nurses; who, from their constant practice and experience are supposed sufficiently qualified to direct it; and that it is a province in which they ought not be controlled. These arguments, which have originated in ignorance and superstition, are supported upon no other or better ground than prejudice; as daily experience proves their fallacy” (p. 11).

they crystallize in a scene in volume 2. Published about the same time as Cadogan's *Essay upon Nursing*, this scene illustrates the cultural ambiguity about sexual and maternal definitions of women and clearly places the breast at the center of that ambiguity.

The relevant sequence begins at a moment when it appears that at last Lovelace will marry Clarissa and end his dangerous game. Lulling her—and us—into a false sense of security with respectful remarks about her family, sensible arrangements for obtaining a marriage license and drafts of the settlements, and repeated proposals of particular days for the happy event, he reclines his head upon her shoulder and begins to kiss her hands. “Rather bashfully than angrily reluctant,” he writes to Belford, “her hands sought to be withdrawn; her shoulder avoiding my reclined cheek—apparently loath, and more loath, to quarrel with me.” He then snatches away her handkerchief, and with “burning lips” he kisses “the most charming breast that ever my ravished eyes beheld.” She struggles angrily out of his grasp, saying “*I see there is no keeping terms with you. Base encroacher!*”<sup>66</sup>

Later in the letter Lovelace writes this paean to the breast—and the woman—he has tried to appropriate by stealth and force: “Let me perish, Belford, if I would not forego the brightest diadem in the world for the pleasure of seeing a twin Lovelace at each charming breast, drawing from it his first sustenance; the pious task, for physical reasons, continued for one month and no more!”<sup>67</sup> The sexual breast briefly experienced earlier in the day is here transformed into the maternal breast, property of Lovelace the conqueror. His fantasy of possession is not a fantasy of erotic pleasure, but a fantasy of territorial claim. To discover Clarissa's sexual charms is to imagine colonizing them, domesticating them, rather than voluptuously enjoying them. He would rather own this one woman than be crowned with “the brightest diadem,” he asserts. Moreover, this kingdom of one has the capacity to reproduce him—in duplicate—to create a society in his image and to nurture it singlehandedly, in an image of bountiful and even heroic nature.

The oddly medical addendum to this fantasy, the recommendation that the nursing mother continue “for one month and no more,” calls our attention to the new prestige for professional medical expertise in these matters and to Richardson's own particular interest in questions of maternal breast-feeding. In the third edition of *Clarissa*, published three years later, he specifically reminds us of his earlier treatment of this subject with a footnote referring the reader to the debate in the sequel to *Pamela* published in 1741, *Pamela II*, “between Mr. B. and his Pamela, on the important subject of mothers being nurses to their own children.”<sup>68</sup> There, Richardson had

<sup>66</sup>Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, 4 vols. (London, 1747–48; rpt. New York, 1962), 2:476.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.* I am grateful to Florian Stuber for calling this footnote to my attention.

represented Mr. B. as forbidding Pamela to nurse their child, although she wanted to and argued with him. Whereas in most other things Mr. B. is enchanted by Pamela's unerring sense of honor and obligation, in this matter he disputes her judgment and insists that she follow his command rather than her own conscience—precisely because his rights in her sexual person are at stake. Richardson depicts their dispute and Pamela's capitulation in a series of letters Pamela writes to her parents from London, where she has come for her first lying-in. For Pamela and her parents in 1741, nursing was a moral duty—even a sentimental pleasure—but not yet a medical imperative. More significant, it was still seen as less urgent than a woman's duty to sexually serve her husband. Mr. B. argues that breast-feeding will engross Pamela's time in an office that was now beneath her and disturb her rest. He also objects to it on the grounds that it will interfere with his enjoyment of "her person" and the pleasing sight of her "personal graces." Her first responsibility is to his sexual satisfaction, and he is sure that nursing will interrupt his "honest pleasure" and ruin her figure. Women were not supposed to engage in sexual relations when they were nursing a baby, for it was believed it would spoil the milk—curdle it and make it sour. Physiologically, sexuality and maternity were understood to be mutually exclusive if a woman was nursing—which must account in part for the widespread use of nurses in families that could afford them.

The argument between Mr. B. and Pamela about maternal breast-feeding in the last volume of *Pamela II* is only the most prominent in a series of transactions whose effect is to separate Pamela's maternal self from her sexual self, that is, to redefine her as an ardent mother and not as Mr. B.'s sexual object. Once Pamela surrendered her long-defended chastity in legitimate marriage, Richardson had to recast the narrative conflict in the last volume as a dramatic opposition between sexuality and maternity. The emotional business of the last volume is precisely to detach motherhood from sexual desire and to reorient Mr. B.'s love accordingly. From the entertainments to which Pamela is introduced when she enters London society for the first time, to Mr. B.'s jealous competition with his infant son for Pamela's attention, to the stabilizing of their monogamous marriage through Pamela's renunciatory turn from sexual wife to chaste mother in her psychological duel with the Countess Dowager of ———, the incidents of this last volume all work to clarify for us the emotions of a mother and to distinguish them from the emotions of a wife or sexual partner.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup>The literary anatomizing of these two conflicting roles begins with the plays Pamela sees, the first she has ever attended: a tragedy (Ambrose Philips's *The Distressed Mother*) and a comedy (Richard Steele's *The Tender Husband; or, The Accomplished Fools*). Both plays dramatize potential dangers to matrimonial fidelity, a foreshadowing of Mr. B.'s flirtation with the Countess Dowager of ———. In *The Distressed Mother*, an adaptation of Racine's *Andromaque*, Andromache must choose between saving her son by marrying Pyrrhus—thus betraying her



The antithetical relation between nursing and sex as it was understood undoubtedly had some basis in the mild contraceptive properties of lactation, which were relatively well known.<sup>70</sup> It is simply less possible for a woman to conceive when she is nursing. Whether or not this commonly held opposition found both in the medical literature and in old wives' tales constituted a cultural taboo against the sexual activity of a nursing mother is a matter of dispute.<sup>71</sup> But Mr. B.'s refusal to share his wife's bodily services with an infant is probably typical of his historical location and his class and was an attitude that had long existed in English culture. Husbands' desire to resume sexual relations with their wives led to minimizing the maternal role—and to the general use of wet nurses. As William Gouge wrote in 1622, "Husbands for the most part are the cause that their wives nurse not their own children,"<sup>72</sup> and both Linda Pollock and Valerie Fildes confirm this attitude into the early eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Even as late as 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft remarked, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, that there were "husbands so devoid of sense and parental affection, that during the first effervescence of voluptuous fondness they refuse to let their wives suckle their children."<sup>74</sup> Here Wollstonecraft emphasized the appropriation of women's sexual services as an earlier social formation than the maternal practices of her contemporary society.

The medical discourse on breast-feeding in the second half of the eighteenth century did not dwell on the biological mechanisms that made it inadvisable to nurse while engaging in sexual activity—but the opposition continued to be implied in the accusation that women were sacrificing their children to the decadent pleasures of the social whirl. It was also argued that careless wet nurses, who pretended to but did not actually

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fidelity to her dead husband, Hector—or preserving that wifely vow and sacrificing her son. The play demonstrates emblematically the double bind involved in being a wife and a mother and foreshadows the dilemma in store for Pamela. In its symbolization and its action, the narrative of this volume accentuates, explores, unsettles, but eventually ratifies Pamela's transition from being an eighteenth-century Cinderella heroine to being a model bourgeois mother and wife.

<sup>70</sup>Dorothy McLaren, "Nature's Contraceptive: Wet Nursing and Prolonged Lactation: The Case of Chesham, Buckinghamshire 1578–1601," *Medical History* 23 (1979): 426–41; Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>71</sup>Valerie Fildes argues that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the belief that nursing mothers should abstain from sex, which goes back at least as far as Galen, was very much attenuated (*Breasts, Bottles, and Babies*, pp. 104–5, 121). Linda Pollock, on the other hand, argues that "it was believed that women who were feeding should abstain from sex, on the grounds that intercourse curdled the milk, and that if the mother became pregnant her milk supply would dry up" (*A Lasting Relationship* [n. 28 above], pp. 53–55).

<sup>72</sup>William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), quoted in Fildes, *Wet Nursing* (n. 3 above), p. 84.

<sup>73</sup>Pollock, *Forgotten Children* (n. 1 above), p. 50; Fildes, *Wet Nursing*, p. 84.

<sup>74</sup>Wollstonecraft (n. 11 above), p. 142.

abstain from sexual relations while engaged to nurse another's newborn, could ruin their milk supply and endanger their charges if they became pregnant again.<sup>75</sup> Even eighteenth-century medical men who explicitly denied the necessity for continence while nursing recommended waiting several hours after intercourse before nursing and encouraged general sexual moderation.<sup>76</sup>

The cross-cultural evidence that mothers in some societies practice sexual abstinence while nursing suggests a possible psychological or emotional basis for the strain between these two deployments of the body.<sup>77</sup> Feeding a newborn on demand, giving oneself over to the rhythms of the child, can be exhausting and leaves little energy for sexual play. Moreover, the erotic symbiosis between infant and mother can be so absorbing as to leave the mother uninterested in other libidinous contact. William Buchan hints at this erotic satisfaction in *Advice to Mothers* (1769): "The thrilling sensations, as before observed, that accompany the act of giving suck, can be conceived only by those who have felt them, while the mental raptures of a fond mother at such moments are far beyond the powers of description or fancy."<sup>78</sup> Finally, the combination of total power and selfless responsibility experienced in caring for an utterly dependent infant may be at odds with the helpless hungers of sexual desire as we know it.

The ambiguity about the function and definition of the breast as maternal or (hetero)sexual seems pivotal to me here. The locus of many a modern woman's role strain during the first year of her child's life, the breast seems to have represented for eighteenth-century women the mutually exclusive nature of motherhood and sexual desire.<sup>79</sup> In our own culture, the breast is defined as the quintessence of female sexuality, symbolic in its externality of both the pornographic and erogenous possibilities of female flesh. From *Playboy* bunnies to silicon implants, the culture invests the breast with great power as a sexual stimulus. For women in twentieth-century America, breasts often emblemize their femininity and their success or failure as sex objects and hence as women.<sup>80</sup> In eighteenth-century England, a woman who used her breasts to nurse her children literally suspended other erotic

<sup>75</sup>Hugh Smith (n. 40 above), p. 73.

<sup>76</sup>See, for example, treatises by John Maubray (1724) and John Theobald (1764) (n. 40 above).

<sup>77</sup>Gabrielle Palmer, *The Politics of Breastfeeding* (London, 1988), pp. 92–103.

<sup>78</sup>Buchan (n. 40 above), p. 210.

<sup>79</sup>On the role strain between maternal nursing and sexual play, see Palmer, pp. 28–31, 92–103. For another statement of the centrality of breasts to eighteenth-century definitions of women's sexual nature, see Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Madison, WI, 1989), pp. 78–79.

<sup>80</sup>Daphna Ayalah and Isaac J. Weinstock, *Breasts: Women Speak about Their Breasts and Their Lives* (New York, 1979).

bodily practices until the child was weaned. Psychologically as well as physically, motherhood cancelled a woman's (hetero)sexuality. Either a woman sent away her children to nurse (if she could afford to) and resumed her earlier social and sexual identity, or she gave herself over to the business of mothering.

Lovelace's fantasy of a domesticated Clarissa (together with Richardson's footnote to his treatment of these issues in *Pamela II*) locates this cultural ambivalence toward breasts in the middle of the eighteenth century and connects it to the new interest in maternity. The medical addendum—"for physical reasons, continued for one month and no more"—indicates how scientized these arguments had become in the years since Mr. B. worried that breast-feeding would alter Pamela's "genteel form." As if to complete the sequence of ideological conversion, Richardson wrote a third time about maternal breast-feeding in his last novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), in a manner that suggests that medical opinion about the benefits of breast-feeding for both infant and mother had by that time prevailed. Indeed, Richardson's successive treatments of maternal breast-feeding can be read as stages in an advancing belief system whose tenets included the following: that women's essential nature was to be mothers; that men's rights in women's bodies extended to their reproductive functions and, indeed, that men's ascendancy over women was based on women's "natural propensity" for motherhood; that maternal feeling was antithetic to sexual desire; and that men's heterosexual desire was an immature expression of the ultimate desire to procreate and to "have" a family. From Mr. B. who does not want his wife's reproductive labors to interfere with her sexual services, to Lovelace who fantasizes his ultimate conquest of Clarissa not as raping her but as making a mother of her, to Charlotte Grandison, Sir Charles's witty and irrepressible sister, newly softened and "feminized" by motherhood, Richardson's characters reflect the growing preoccupation with women as reproducers.

In *Sir Charles Grandison*, Charlotte Grandison is tamed by motherhood, and the scene in which she nurses her "little marmoset" celebrates her triumphal entry into true womanhood with her delighted spouse's approval and relief. This time there is no demur, whether about the optimal duration of nursing or any husbandly objection to a woman's decision to take on that office herself. The lively Charlotte Grandison is brought into line by child-bearing, made to see her true nature, calmed, and fulfilled: "matronized" is Richardson's word. When she nurses her newborn infant for the first time, her husband throws himself at her feet in raptures and insists on watching, providing dramatic evidence for Hugh Smith's specular argument in *Letters to Married Women* (1767) 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 en-

chanting object on earth.”<sup>81</sup> In Richardson’s last novel, breast-feeding brings the lively woman to heel, not the authority of her husband. Perfect Pamela may think her moral duty lies in nursing her own child, but her parents advise her that her sexual services to her husband come first, and her wifely obedience is proved by hiring a wet nurse. But by the time of *Sir Charles Grandison*, a woman’s wifely obedience was guaranteed by her reproductive services, her willingness to undertake the lowly task of nursing her own child.

As fiction began to valorize maternal feeling, women’s physiological needs increasingly were seen as focused in the desire for a child, and other sexual urges were interpreted as perverse. Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan* records the incompatibility of these two modalities, the sexual and the maternal, insofar as its heroine is of the earlier sexual sort, caught in the moral context of the later period. A throwback to those earlier creations of Behn or Haywood, Lady Susan is as confidently sexy and verbally brilliant as a Restoration heroine. But she is out of place in the moralized and domesticated world of late eighteenth-century fiction.<sup>82</sup> Her incongruence in this world is detected by her insufficiently maternal behavior toward her daughter Frederika.

Other novels as well were part of the discourse that desexualized the female breast and redefined women’s physiological nature for domestic life. A scene in Clara Reeve’s *The Two Mentors* (1783) reinscribes the husbandly adoration of maternal breast-feeding foreshadowed in *Sir Charles Grandison* and promised by a number of medical treatises and conduct manuals. Framed as a narrative about a young lord who secretly marries and impregnates a penniless gentlewoman of whom his parents disapprove, the interpolated tale tells of their interrupted flight when the young wife goes into labor. Although the best that can be done for them is done, the young woman dies tragically, soon after giving birth to a daughter. The next day Bennet, the narrator, seeking his own wife all over the house in which these events have transpired, finds her in the nursery. In his own words: “I found her—oh divine benevolence! emanation of the Divinity! first of the Christian virtues!—I found her giving her own breast to the poor little orphan child, while the tears rolled down her cheeks in compassion for it. I kneeled involuntarily to her as to a superior being.—Oh Maria! my angel wife! This action is worthy of thee, and few besides thee would have performed it.” The divine Maria then asks his forgiveness for performing this office without first asking his permission, for her reproductive services are his to

<sup>81</sup>Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, 7 vols. (London, 1753–54), 7:209–13; Smith, p. 77.

<sup>82</sup>For a discussion of whether *Lady Susan* was written in the 1790s or between 1800 and 1805, see B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen’s Literary Manuscripts* (London, 1964), pp. 136–48.

command. To this he replies: "Excuse you! my love . . . I adore you for it." He then informs the new father of this turn of events, which makes possible another sentimental scene: "Tears and blessings spoke his gratitude for it."<sup>83</sup> Three times the worshipful husband bows down before his domestic madonna: when he first finds her in the nursery, when she asks his permission to continue nursing the orphan, and when he tells the bereaved husband about the angelic wet nurse of his new child. This is Mrs. Bennet's moment of glory, a moment emphasized by the text, a moment very much belonging to its particular historical context—when practices commodified earlier as services performed for wages by working-class women are remunerated ideologically (with adoration) when performed voluntarily by middle-class women.

The movement to promote breast-feeding in the latter part of the eighteenth century has always been understood as the sane light of reason penetrating the dark corners of superstitious compulsion. Randolph Trumbach has argued that breast-feeding and maternal care lowered the aristocratic death rate in the second half of the eighteenth century and that it was "one of the finest fruits of the Enlightenment."<sup>84</sup> What I have been trying to suggest is that this movement involved an unprecedented cultural use of women and the appropriation of their bodies for procreation. A discourse including sentimental fiction and medical treatises functioned as a new way to colonize the female body and to designate within women's experience a new arena of male expertise, control, and instruction.

#### RESISTANCE

There is at least literary evidence that the English craze for breast-feeding in the last half of the eighteenth century, which had men kneeling to their wives, was a matter of some ambivalence to women. Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* thematizes anxiety about the breast and its functions in a powerful narrative of loneliness and fear. Lady Delacour, an intelligent woman driven by love of admiration to extravagance and affectation, tells her history to Belinda. Like Austen's Lady Susan, she is impudent and entertaining as a character from the Restoration stage. But though all gaiety on the outside, she fears she is dying of breast cancer, the culmination of the mess she has made of domestic life. A failed mother, her first child was born dead "because I would not be kept prisoner half a year." A second starved to death at her breast: "It was the fashion in that time for fine mothers to suckle their own children. . . . There was a prodigious point made about the matter; a vast deal of sentiment and sympathy, and compliments and enquiries. But

<sup>83</sup>Clara Reeve, *The Two Mentors* (London, 1783), pp. 175–76.

<sup>84</sup>Trumbach (n. 1 above), p. 191.

after the novelty was over, I became heartily sick of the business; and at the end of three months my poor child was sick too—I don't much like to think of it—it died."<sup>85</sup> Her husband, estranged by her notorious conduct, kills a man in a duel defending her honor, and the victim's grieving mother haunts her dreams. Finally, as a result of a blow on the breast during a transvestite adventure with a dueling pistol, she so injures herself that when her remaining daughter embraces her, she screams with pain and pushes her away. Thus, in stubbornly clinging to her sexual self—and refusing the responsibilities of domestic life—she does real damage to her maternal organ.

Behind a locked dressing room door, amidst the vials of ill-smelling medicines and rags, she confesses to Belinda her terror of breast cancer, from which she fears she is dying. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace has interpreted the meaning of her disease as guilt over her failure to nurse her child: "The injured breast . . . is the center of her excruciating hurt, the psychic wound which she suffers in connection with her inability to perform the mother's role."<sup>86</sup> But Lady Delacour's history could also be read as festering resentment at the colonization of her body, represented synecdochically by the breast that poisons her life. Her adventures and friendship with the cross-dressing Harriot Freke are attempts to escape women's domestic roles and retain an independent life. But her body is never her own, as its traumas register vividly; her desires pervert its natural functions, and its health is beyond her capacity to understand or maintain. When at last she confesses to her husband that the secret of her locked boudoir is not a lover but a diseased breast and permits a famous doctor to examine her, she finds that her injury is not mortal after all. When she accedes at last to the wisdom of male medical professionals, she is cured. But the irreducible horror of her fear and suffering remain—a record of her alienation from her female body and its vulnerability to male control. In its preoccupation with issues of women's power and domesticity, as they are contested on the site of the female breast, *Belinda* documents an extraordinary historical moment in the social construction of woman's nature.

*The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), by Frances Sheridan, is another novel with an emblematic scene about breast disease. An unrelenting representation of miserable, obsessive, filial obedience, the novel has at its center an interpolated tale about a young woman with a diseased breast, who lives in Sidney Bidulph's neighborhood. The circumstances that the sufferer first bruised this tender part of her anatomy while reaching for a book, that her ensuing illness interrupted her correspondence with her lover of choice, and that this lover was a physician whose skill might have

<sup>85</sup>Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London, 1801; rpt. London, 1986), p. 33.

<sup>86</sup>Kowaleski-Wallace, "Home Economics" (n. 3 above), p. 250.

prevented the disease are, in the context of the main plot of the novel, crucially symbolic. They constitute a subtext that simultaneously critiques the masochistically passive protagonist while it reinforces the message that women's bodies are vulnerable to male control and their health dependent on male knowledge. In contrast to Sidney Bidulph's suicidal docility and her obstinate obedience to her undeserving mother and husband, this young woman's firmness—her belief in her choice and judgment—saves her breast, saves her life, and most certainly saves her marriage.

The anecdote begins and ends with the wedding of the deserving young woman told by Sidney Bidulph in a letter to a friend. It seems that the bride's father had left a will stating that if she married without her brother's consent she could not inherit her fortune, but at the age of twenty-one she "had the power of bequeathing her fortune by will to whom she pleased." She falls in love with a young physician, against whose family her brother bears a grudge. It is at this juncture that she injures her breast, symbol of her jeopardized womanhood, torn between lover and brother. Her brother, angry at her refusal to marry a rich man, retains an inferior doctor who, after inflaming the infection for three months, prepares to amputate the breast. Our heroine, with a fortitude, independence, and foresight that Sidney Bidulph stood in great need of, summons her brother and her lover to the scene of her surgery to announce that, since she is now twenty-one and her life is in danger, she is willing her fortune to her lover. Whereupon this sagacious young man examines her breast and announces that her state is the result of medical bungling and that her wound can be cured and the breast spared without endangering her life. A second opinion is sought from an eminent Bath surgeon, who concurs with the physician-lover. In a simultaneous triumph of advanced urban medical knowledge and men's superior knowledge of women's reproductive bodies, the young woman perfectly recovers her health in five weeks' time.<sup>87</sup>

Once again, the breast is the locus of women's vulnerability to male control, the site of her sexual definition and dependence and of the struggle between men over her sexual uses. That her lover uses his superior science to save her breast—and thereby win her as his wife—seems only fair. Medicine and romantic love together construct the woman as sexual property in this sequence.

It is not merely coincidence that novels dealing with breast disease, written by women, appeared in roughly the same period as medical treatises advocating maternal breast-feeding and such sentimental scenes of maternal nursing as I have noted in the novels of Richardson and Reeve. All of these texts participated in the new cultural discourse constructing women's

<sup>87</sup>Frances Sheridan, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, 3 vols. (London, 1761), 2:266–81.

bodies as maternal rather than sexual, symbolized in reconceptualizing the function of the breast. Thus, the debate over the “natural” sexual or reproductive purposes of the female body found fictional representation in scenes focusing on the female breast, whether to revere it as a site of maternal self-sacrifice or to fear and loathe it as a site of inexplicable disease. If Richardson’s scenes involving breast-feeding in his successive novels illustrate the cultural appropriation of women’s bodies for reproductive purposes, then the novels of Frances Sheridan and Maria Edgeworth dramatize women’s resentment at this new colonization of their bodies. The scenes and images of breast disease in their novels may express how women felt victimized by their female bodies and by their new dependence on superior male medical knowledge of those bodies. These fictional representations are the other side of the new reverence for motherhood, record of a growing feeling among women that they no longer controlled their own bodies, no longer believed they could understand their own physiological processes, no longer believed in their shared medical and herbal knowledge, no longer expected to exercise independent judgment about how to deploy their bodies.

Science, national interest, “natural” feeling, and morality all concurred in the judgment that maternal practice was at the heart of real femininity. It became less and less acceptable for women to delegate their reproductive services to hired labor, to wet nurses. In other words, the effect of erasing class differences among women in this matter was to universalize the meanings and purposes of the female body and to reduce the degrees of freedom in interpreting women’s sex roles. Gender—not class—increasingly defined a woman’s duties. And the dimensions of gender were being redefined by medical treatises on motherhood and childcare, by conduct literature, and by the novel. Thus, the “invention” of childhood, the new sentimentality about motherhood, and the representation of the female breast in fiction of the later eighteenth century are all different aspects of the same cultural phenomenon: the reconfiguration of class and gender within English society and the colonization of the female body for domestic life.