"The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman's Nature Is Capable": Breast-Feeding and the Sentimental Maternal Ideal in America, 1750–1860

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In 1809 the American midwife Mary Watkins published a treatise on mothering in which she admonished that any mother who neglected to breast-feed was being "deprived of a very high source of pleasure, of the most tender and endearing kind."[1] Watkins was joining a dialogue about breast-feeding that had been taking place among medical professionals and moralists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean since the mid-eighteenth century. Worried about high rates of infant mortality and the use of wet nurses, proponents of maternal nursing initially stressed nature, health, and divine ordination to highlight the importance of the duty. By the time Watkins issued her appeal to maternal pleasure, however, an important shift in their arguments in favor of maternal breast-feeding had occurred. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, advice manuals began to exhibit a new sentimental rhetoric that emphasized maternal pleasure and the affective bonds of motherhood. The rhetoric of pleasure in representations of breast-feeding contributed to the development of a sentimental maternal ideal that would dominate white middle-class conceptions of womanhood into the mid-nineteenth century.

The shift in breast-feeding discussions that occurred between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries was part of a larger shift in ideas about womanhood in Anglo-American culture. English and American writers began to articulate a particular vision of women as mothers and even began to equate the two roles. To be a woman *was* to be a mother, and to be a good mother was to fulfill the highest and most sacred purpose of womanhood. Ruth Bloch has argued that eighteenth-century Anglo-American ideals of womanhood "dwelt primarily on woman's relationships to God and man as Christian, wife, and social companion" rather than invoking the theme of motherhood. By century's end, "older ideals of domestic competence and ornamental purity" had combined to create the ideal of the "moral mother." This ideal reflected the influence of Enlightenment philosophy that had begun to make its way across the Atlantic to America. New ideas

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[1] Mary Watkins, *Maternal Solicitude, or, Lady's Manual: Comprising a brief view of the happy advantages resulting from an early attention to secure a good constitution in their Infants* (New York, 1809), 9.

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about the perfectibility of mankind led writers such as the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to reconsider the roles of men and women and to analyze how women, in particular, contributed to social progress as mothers.[2]

Although many advice manual authors of the period believed that motherhood was a biological and an instinctual role, they mistrusted women's ability to perform it. Mixing unveiled criticism with increasing sentimentalism—an often-saccharine emphasis on emotion and on the sensuous appreciation of nature and humanity—these writers sought to encourage, educate, and correct mothers. Breast-feeding often appeared at the center of their prescriptions for good mothering, described as a supposedly instinctual practice that women allegedly did not attend to with due diligence. The discussions highlight the reality that the "biological phenomena of fertility control, pregnancy, birth, and lactation are never merely biological; they are experienced within the rituals, expectations, and technology of a particular historical time and place."[3] The meaning of breast-feeding changed significantly over time. Because it was an experience shared by the majority of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it provides historians with a lens through which to understand how the cultural script of sentimental motherhood developed. Moreover, the sensual and sometimes erotic focus on pleasure in discussions of breast-feeding during that time raises new ideas about the intersection of romantic love, female sexuality, and motherhood in representations of ideal womanhood. Advice manuals targeted an audience of white middle-class and elite mothers who had the ability and means to consult prescriptive literature. The personal writings of these women from privileged class and race positions show some of the ways their breast-feeding experiences measured up to the ideals they were encountering in prescriptive and popular literature. While a systematic sampling of archival sources across the United States might reveal regional trends in the experience of breast-feeding based on material, economic, and ideological particularities, it appears that class and race were more salient factors than region in the ways women experienced the processes of motherhood and the ways they interpreted those experiences. Above all, what becomes clear in these sources is that the experience of motherhood was deeply individual. This essay will combine close analyses of published representations of breast-feeding with the personal writings of mothers to show how the rhetoric of breast-feeding illuminated the development of the sentimental maternal ideal in America.

Maternal advice manuals from the mid-eighteenth century, most published in England and reprinted in America, presented varied opinions on a range of subjects from the lying-in period to childhood illnesses. They were, however, notably consistent in their discussions of the benefits of maternal breast-feeding. Male physicians wrote the majority of the early manuals, joined occasionally by a female midwife or mother. Not until the nineteenth century did women begin to put their own ideas and expertise as mothers into

[2] Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815," in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800*, ed. Ruth H. Bloch (Berkeley, 2003), 58, 60, 66, esp. 57. For a discussion of women's roles according to Enlightenment philosophy, see, for example, Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 2007), esp. 3–4; and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 176–79.

[3] Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, Ky., 1996), 40.

print, combining the medical approach of physicians with a more emotional focus on the experiences of motherhood.[4]

In contrast to a later emphasis on pleasure in discussions of breast-feeding, mid-eighteenth-century authors expressed concern for maternal and infant health and criticized women for thwarting God and nature by refusing to nurse. How many American mothers truly neglected to breast-feed is difficult to ascertain, but the issue of infant feeding did become a problem in cases of maternal illness or death. Janet Lynne Golden's history of wet-nursing has shown that women either chose not to breast-feed or were prevented from breast-feeding for a number of reasons, including disease, breast infections or abscesses, fatigue, and stress. These circumstances, as well as the dire reality of maternal mortality, meant that some infants had to be fed either by hand or at the breast of another woman.[5]

Throughout the eighteenth century breast milk was in high demand, often "the most frequently advertised commodity in American newspapers." Advertisements announced with little variation that "A Certain Person wants a wet Nurse into the House, to Suckle a Child." Many women advertised their own services, proposing that "A young Woman with a new breast of milk, wants a place in a genteel family, as Wet Nurse." While these advertisements did not reveal why a woman's services were needed or offered, they did illustrate that proponents of maternal nursing had at least some cause for concern about a woman's ability or willingness to breast-feed. Moreover, the advertisements exposed the real economic value of mothers as producers. The employment of a wet nurse provided needed income for poor mothers; for middle-class and elite families, the hiring of a wet nurse replaced the productivity of the mother. For these reasons, many critics linked the refusal to breast-feed to fashion and wealth.[6]

Warning against mothers' "inhumane Treatment of our tender little Ones," early prescriptive writers encouraged women to nurse by stressing the dictates of mother and infant health and the authority of nature. The British physician William Cadogan, who served as the governor of the London Foundling Hospital in the 1750s, made his case for maternal breast-feeding in one of the period's most influential and widely circulated texts on child rearing. "If we follow Nature," he wrote, "instead of leading or driving it, we cannot err." Using pragmatic medical concerns to promote maternal breast-feeding, he also insisted that by nursing, "the Mother would likewise, in most hysterical nervous cases, establish her own health by it, . . . as well as that of her offspring." Concerned specifically with the health of infants, the British physician Hugh Smith lamented that

[4] Examples of early breast-feeding literature by women include Sophia Hume, *An Exhortation to the Inhabitants of the Province of South-Carolina, to bring their Deeds to the Light of Christ in their own Conscience* (Philadelphia, 1748); Ann Gilbert Taylor, *Practical Hints to Young Females, On The Duties of a Wife, a Mother, and a Mistress of a Family* (Boston, 1816); and Lydia Maria Child, *The Mother's Book* (Boston, 1831). The first medical manual published by an American woman was [Mary Hunt Palmer Tyler], *The Maternal Physician; A Treatise on the Nurture and Management of Infants, from the Birth until Two Years Old. Being the Result of Sixteen Years' Experience in the Nursery* (New York, 1811).

[5] Janet Lynne Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 19.

[6] Ernest Caulfield, "Infant Feeding in Colonial America," *Journal of Pediatrics,* 41 (no. 1, 1952), 677; Classified advertisement, *Boston News-Letter,* Nov. 15–22, 1714, issue 553, p. 2, available at *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers;* Classified advertisement, *New York Daily Advertiser,* Jan. 30, 1795, issue 3108, p. 4, *ibid.*

he was "heartily sorry [that] the present manner of bringing up children puts me, in some measure, under the necessity of proving milk to be the best food that can be given them."[7]

Among these early authors' comments on the healthful effects of breast-feeding were hints about the concept of pleasure that would become a significant method of persuasion by the end of the eighteenth century. Cadogan complained that women who refused to nurse their children did not understand that, "were it rightly managed, there would be much Pleasure in it." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose writings on motherhood and education were cited by authors in England and America, pressed his case more strongly. He proposed that "when mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart," for "in the cheerful home life the mother finds her sweetest duties and the father his pleasantest recreation." Hugh Smith worried that the few women who were unable to nurse were "thus deprived of a happiness, only known to those who enjoy it." Cadogan, Rousseau, and Smith, whose texts were printed and frequently cited into the nineteenth century, illustrated the transitional nature of ideas about motherhood. Combining a harsh critique of negligent mothers with expressions of maternal enjoyment, these early works reflected a gradual shift to sentimental representations of breast-feeding and motherhood.[8]

By the turn of the nineteenth century the language of pleasure had become a primary vehicle for promoting maternal breast-feeding and helped solidify the sentimental maternal ideal. The image of the chaste, tender, and dutiful mother proliferated in advice manuals and popular literature, emphasizing the sentimental familial bonds that could be forged by a good mother and strengthened by the act of nursing. Advocates of maternal breast-feeding argued that nursing was "an obligation so strongly enforced by nature, that no woman can evade the performance of it with impunity. But cheerful obedience to this sovereign law is attended with the sweetest pleasures of which the human heart is susceptible." The American physician Thomas Ewell wondered "how any woman could be so lost to the feelings of nature, as to give up the pleasure of this undertaking."[9]

For advisers such as Ewell, the desire to breast-feed had to be an innate part of motherhood; the woman who neglected the practice or was unable to nurse was considered an unnatural or an unlucky mother. William Dewees, a prominent Philadelphia practitioner of midwifery, suggested that those "women who may stifle this strong maternal yearning . . . have ever been the subject of the satirist's lash, and the object of the moralist's declamation." He did soften his criticism by adding that nursing was enjoyable and necessary: "*She must not delegate to any being the sacred and delightful task of suckling her child, unless*

[7] Hume, *Exhortation to the Inhabitants of the Province of South-Carolina,* 120; William Cadogan, *An Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children, from their birth to three years of age* (1748; London, 1750), 13, 17; Hugh Smith, *The Female Monitor, consisting of a series of Letters to Married Women on Nursing and the Management of Children* (Wilmington, 1801), 61.

[8] Cadogan, *Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children,* 27; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education,* trans. Barbara Foxley (London, 1966), 13; Smith, *Female Monitor,* 71.

[9] William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers, on the subject of their own health; and of the means of promoting the health, strength, and beauty of their offspring* (1769; Boston, 1809), 61; Thomas Ewell, *Letters to Ladies, detailing Important Information, concerning Themselves and Infants* (Philadelphia, 1817), 219.

there be the most decided and insurmountable impropriety in continuing it at her own breast."[10] Only medical complications could warrant the neglect of so delightful a duty as breast-feeding.

Some authors did recognize that breast-feeding could involve discomfort and difficulty. As a mother, Ann Allen wrote of breast-feeding as "a pleasing, although a painful sensation," but urged women not to be deterred, for "if you would be a happy mother . . . be a faithful mother, and you will be rewarded daily." Even the Scottish physician William Buchan's rapturous conception of breast-feeding acknowledged the possibility of discomfort; but, he argued, "a little pain is easily surmounted, and is followed by lasting pleasure." Medical manuals combined practical medical advice with sentimental images of mothering. Most offered remedies for the complications associated with pregnancy, childbirth, infant illnesses, as well as for such excruciating effects of lactation as abscessed breasts and cracked nipples—startling reminders of the more painful aspects of maternity.[11]

By emphasizing pleasure, proponents of maternal breast-feeding naturalized a particular vision of the ideal mother whose happiness depended on an intimate connection to her infant. The popular American domestic author Lydia Sigourney waxed poetic on the pleasures of the nursing mother and exhorted women to bask in the joys of motherhood by fulfilling their natural role: "Were I to define the climax of happiness which a mother enjoys with her infant, I should by no means limit it to the first three months. The whole season while it is deriving nutriment from her, is one of peculiar, inexpressible felicity. Dear friends, be not anxious to abridge this halcyon period. Do not willingly deprive yourselves of any portion of the highest pleasure of which woman's nature is capable." Sigourney placed the experience of nursing at the center of maternal happiness, and she encouraged mothers to embrace and extend this source of joy. If pleasure was an inherent part of nursing, then good mothering by definition must be a pleasurable experience. Other writers linked the practical utility of breast-feeding to maternal satisfaction, for "happy [is] the mother who *can* suckle her infant; she who has not the power to do so is deprived of one of the greatest maternal pleasures, while her toils and anxieties are more than doubled." Breast-feeding was a pleasure, and it saved mothers the anxieties of entrusting their infants to wet nurses or struggling to feed them by hand.[12]

Proponents of maternal breast-feeding also portrayed the pleasure of breast-feeding as necessary to the mother's good health. A popular mother's magazine offered a brief sketch of the ideal woman, who epitomized "health and love—woman's highest blessings—and she takes her child to her breast, and imparts that nourishment which the Creator has designed for its sustenance; and in so doing she is conscious of a new

[10] William P. Dewees, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children* (1825; Philadelphia, 1847), 54, 45. Emphasis in original.

[11] Ann Allen, *The Young Mother and Nurse's Oracle: For the benefit of the uninitiated* (Cincinnati,1858), 62; Buchan, *Advice to Mothers*, 32. For practical remedies for the effects of lactation and breast-feeding, see, for example, Thomas Bull, *Hints to Mothers, for the management of health during the period of pregnancy, and in the lying-in room with an exposure of popular errors in connexion with those subjects* (New York, 1842), esp. 177.

[12] Mrs. L. H. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (1830; Hartford, 1838), 28–29; Mrs. J. Bakewell, *The Mother's Practical Guide in the Early Training of her Children containing directions for their physical, intellectual, and moral education* (New York, 1843), 31. Emphasis in original.

principle of delight, physically and morally. The turbulence of love is past, and she has now that tranquil enjoyment best adapted to her health and her moral and intellectual growth."[13] The article reinforced the idea that breast-feeding would provide emotional and physical enjoyment to both mother and baby. Moreover, the author's reference to the "turbulence of love" suggested that women's romantic attachments were not conducive to good physical, mental, and spiritual health. Thus motherhood became the most wholesome and enjoyable component of a woman's life and the ultimate goal of true womanhood.

Such representations of maternal pleasure culminated in an emphasis on the direct connection between the pleasure of the nursing mother and the strength the mother-child bond. A sentimental 1804 poem called "Filial Recollections" lyricized the power of the mother-infant union, inquiring:

> Who fed me from her gentle breast,
> And hush'd me in her arms to rest,
> And on my cheek sweet kisses press'd?

The poem reinforces the sentimental appeal of maternal love while linking the affections of the child to the physical care of the mother. Lydia Sigourney spoke in similar terms, invoking a child-centered vision of womanly happiness in her message to American mothers:

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

In Sigourney's vision of motherhood, the bond between mother and child superseded all other affective ties and demonstrated a woman's moral superiority and positive influence on society.[14]

Advice manuals linked women's emotional satisfaction to the bodily experiences of maternity by portraying the mother-child bond as a profoundly physical experience that offered the mother sensual pleasure. By focusing on the physical sensations of breast-feeding, some descriptions of the process highlighted its erotic possibilities and described the pleasures of nursing in a vocabulary of sensuality and sexuality. William Buchan insisted that "all nurses concur in declaring, that the act itself is attended with sweet, thrilling and delightful sensations of which those only who have felt them can form any idea," and he gushed that "the mental raptures of a fond mother at such moments are far beyond the powers of description or fancy." His effusive prose left little doubt about the physical nature of the pleasure involved in breast-feeding. John Burton was even more specific, describing how the reproductive organs were connected by nerves to other parts of the body and using this fact to explain "why some [women] are so fond of giving Suck,

[13] Mrs. Seba Smith, "Anxious Mothers," *Mother's Assistant and Young Lady's Friend,* 2 (Dec. 1842), 265–66.

[14] Samuel Wood, "Filial Recollections," *Early American Imprints,* series 2, no. 20114 (New York, 1804), available at *Readex: America's Historical Imprints;* Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers,* vii.

and why Tickling the Nipples occasions an agreeable Sensation in the *Clitoris.*" Breast-feeding was indeed a stimulating subject.[15]

William Dewees's *Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children* contained an entire section on breast-feeding in which he described it "*as a Pleasure.*" He offered a strikingly erotic description of the physical pleasures of lactation:

> If we can believe the *fond mother* upon this point, there is no earthly pleasure equal to that of suckling her child—and if any reliance can be placed upon external signs, she is every way worthy of belief. This pleasure does not seem to be the mere exercise of social feeling while the mother is witnessing the delight of the little hungry urchin, as it seizes upon the breast—nor from the rapturous expression of its speaking eye, nor the writhing of its little body from excess of joy—but from a positive pleasure derived from the act itself; for most truly it may be said, when
>
> "The starting beverage meets its thirsty lip,
> 'Tis joy to yield it, as 'tis joy to sip."[16]

To Dewees, breast-feeding was an emotionally and physically pleasurable experience that was tinged with eroticism. The raptures of mother and infant centered on the breast—the symbol of motherhood and sexuality. Dewees seemed to hint at what Sigmund Freud would much later make explicit in his work on child sexuality: the experience of sexual satisfaction begins with taking nourishment from the breast. As Freud wrote during the first decade of the twentieth century, "No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life." Such observations suggest that the mother did not enjoy nursing her child merely because she was fulfilling her social duty; the connection between her body and that of her infant also created a physically pleasurable bond that was reminiscent of other kinds of pleasures.[17]

Yet to interpret breast-feeding merely through the image of the bond between mother and infant evades the issue of eroticism in these texts and effaces the importance of other affective ties in representations of motherhood. Advice manual authors also emphasized the link between maternal breast-feeding and marital happiness. Hugh Smith, one of the earliest writers to link pleasure and familial ties, insisted that "a charming offspring will assuredly contribute to unite parents in the lasting bond of friendship." He also suggested that the healthful effects of breast milk on the infant would, in turn, solidify the marital union, uniting mother and father in their pride and love for their thriving child. Others, such as Elizabeth Dawbarn, evoked a more sensual relationship between husband and wife, suggesting that "there is no enjoyment in nature which affords such exquisite pleasure as is felt by a tender mother,

[15] Buchan, *Advice to Mothers,* 31, 61; John Burton, *An Essay Towards a Complete New System of Midwifery, Theoretical and Practical, together with the Descriptions, Causes, and Methods of Removing or Relieving the Disorders peculiar to Pregnant and Lying-in Women, and New-born Infants* (London, 1751), 10–11. Emphasis in original.

[16] Dewees, *Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children,* 55–56. Emphasis in original.

[17] Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (New York, 1977), 98.

when she is nourishing her infant at her breast, and beholds her husband smiling in approbation." Rapturously describing how a husband must feel on seeing "a dear little cherub at your breast," Smith mused, "How ardent soever such an one's affections might be before matrimony, a scene like this will more firmly rivet the pleasing fetters of love."[18]

These descriptions of breast-feeding highlighted a difference between the acts of touching and gazing. Whereas descriptions of the mother and infant emphasized the importance of mutual physical pleasure—the reciprocal touching of mother and infant—here, the gaze of the husband took center stage and suggested that the sight of breast-feeding might provide as much pleasure as the physical act itself. Indeed, nineteenth-century medical texts more generally articulated a unique connection between sexual desire and the male gaze. American physicians such as Dewees and Joseph Warrington insisted that male midwives examine their female patients by touch only, keeping their eyes averted and the body of the woman entirely covered from sight to avoid any indelicate possibilities. Warrington's *Obstetric Catechism* explained in detail the correct procedure for a blind examination:

> Q. What arrangements should be made in order to conduct the examination most satisfactorily?
> A. The room should be darkened, and the patient lightly dressed, and placed in the suitable position.
> Q. What is the rule for carrying the hand under the coverings?
> A. The clothes should be properly raised at their lower edges, by the left hand, and then the right hand with the index finger lubricated, passed cautiously up under the clothes without uncovering the patient.[19]

The impersonal touch of the physician was apparently less dangerous and less potentially erotic than the sight of a woman's flesh. It is no wonder that the image of a breast-feeding woman might contain erotic possibilities. Her flesh was evocative of both motherhood and sexuality, and the gaze of her husband encompassed both aspects of her corporeality.

An article in the *Ladies' Literary Cabinet* described the ideal woman's physical attributes and explicitly attested to the fact that the maternal breast was always also a sexual breast. Revealing the intersection of motherhood and sexuality, the author suggested: "Let her enchanting bosom represent the celestial globes, of which a rose-bud shall form the magnetic pole. Let it offer to desire its first enjoyment—its first nourishment to infancy; and let man ever remain in doubt whether it has most contributed to the happiness of the father or the son." Here, the infant's pleasure and that of the husband (and perhaps the mother too) intertwined around the enchanting breast. The article emphasized that the first use of the breast was for the fulfillment of sexual desire and the second was for the fulfillment of maternal duty. Which of the two was more important the author could not decide, but his coy conclusion suggested that male sexual desire may have been

[18] Smith, *Female Monitor,* 45; Elizabeth Dawbarn, *The Rights of Infants; or, a Letter from a Mother to a Daughter, Relative to the Nursing of Infants* (Wisbech, 1805), 11; Smith, *Female Monitor,* 71.

[19] Joseph Warrington, *Obstetric Catechism; Containing Two Thousand Three Hundred and Forty-Seven Questions and Answers On Obstetrics Proper* (Philadelphia, 1854), 113–14.

foremost in his thoughts even as the sexual overtones of the phrases were mitigated by parenthood.[20]

Such articles not only revealed the significance of breast-feeding as a symbol of love and duty but also spoke to the place of sexuality in marriage and to the growing importance of romantic love in American culture. In her work on courting and marriage in Victorian America, Karen Lystra argues that by 1830 Americans saw romantic love as a necessary component of any marriage, preoccupying the thoughts and feelings of middle-class couples and their families. The links that advice manual authors made between breast-feeding and marital happiness suggest that the romantic ideal may have emerged even earlier in the nineteenth century alongside an emphasis on the importance of parenthood as necessary for a happy union. As the American phrenologist O. S. Fowler explained, it was only "after they have *become parents* together—that they can be completely enamored of each other; because it is her *maternal* relations which most of all endear the wife to her husband, besides making her love him inexpressibly more for being the *father of her idolized children.*" By performing the duties of a good mother, a wife could exemplify love for her husband. Through his admiration for her maternal solicitude, the husband was brought more firmly into the domestic realm.[21]

As the husband derived his enjoyment from viewing the sensual satisfaction of mother and infant, breast-feeding became a three-way site of familial pleasure. The maternal breast was the focal point of the scene in which mother and infant enjoyed the tenderness of mutual caresses while the husband bore rapturous witness to their pleasures. It is difficult to miss the erotic tones in the writings of authors such as Smith, Buchan, Dawbarn, Sigourney, and Dewees. Certainly their use of words such as "exquisite," "ardent," "thrilling," "fancy," "caresses," "delight," "seizes," "rapturous," "writhing," and "excess" were infelicitous choices for desexualizing maternity and reinforcing women's inherent "passionlessness."[22] Yet the tension between their use of words that disguised women's sexuality by emphasizing maternal purity—"chaste," "tranquil enjoyment," "tender," "friendship"—and those that explored it attested to their ambivalence toward female sexuality and its relationship to motherhood.

The tension between motherhood, breast-feeding, and female sexuality has a long history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was believed that sexual intercourse was detrimental to the flow and quality of breast milk and that abstinence was best for lactating mothers. Based on her readings of eighteenth-century English texts, Ruth Perry observed that "maternity came to be imagined as a counter to sexual feeling." The sexual undertones in descriptions of breast-feeding sometimes suggested a divided image of woman as the object of men's desire and the maternal object of men's affections. Hugh Smith argued that "though a beautiful virgin must ever kindle emotions in a man of

[20] "Woman," *Ladies' Literary Cabinet, Being a Repository of Miscellaneous Literary Productions, both Original and Selected, in Prose and Verse,* 7 (no. 1, 1822), 5.

[21] Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1989), 28; O. S. Fowler, *Love and Parentage, applied to the improvement of offspring: Including important directions and suggestions to Lovers and the Married concerning the strongest ties and the most momentous relations of life* (New York, 1850), 58. Emphasis in original.

[22] On the concept of "passionlessness" in this context, see Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs,* 4 (Winter 1978), 219–36.

sensibility, a chaste, and tender wife, with a little one at her breast, is certainly to her husband the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth." Contrasting the sexual appeal of the virgin with the desexualized image of the nursing mother, he implied that motherhood transformed women's sexual allure into something purer and more desirable. Smith presented the breast as the focus of the male gaze, but it became simultaneously desexualized *and* more desirable by virtue of being a maternal, lactating breast.[23]

These simultaneous images of sexual and desexualized maternity raise a number of questions. Why did advice manual authors go to such lengths to prove that mothers took pleasure from breast-feeding? Exactly what kind of pleasure did they imagine that the husband derived from observing the act? Is Perry correct in suggesting that maternity and sexuality were seen as irreconcilable? These references to women's pleasure could be read as a means of concealing female sexuality under a sentimental cloak of chaste motherhood, a means of enforcing passionlessness, and a way of controlling men's supposedly aggressive sexuality. Indeed, in their descriptions of the beauty, desirability, and virtue of nursing mothers, writers suggested that breast-feeding created important familial ties that controlled men's sexuality. Smith asserted that "by these powerful ties, many a man, in spite of impetuous passions, is compelled to continue the prudent, kind, indulgent, tender husband." Here, the pleasures of breast-feeding replaced women's sexual pleasures and the beauty of the breast-feeding mother united the married pair in chaste "friendship." By insisting on respect for a virtuous mother, these authors envisioned a way of controlling men's carnal urges and privileging female purity. If women felt sensual pleasure, it was less threatening for them to take pleasure in the duties of mothering than in other activities that were less chaste. In this way breast-feeding might become the center of pleasure for mother, infant, and husband—creating a domestic ideal that repressed the more dangerous possibilities of female sexual desire.[24]

Yet to assume that advice manual authors sought only to disguise women's sexuality too readily accepts twenty-first-century assumptions about sexual repression in the nineteenth century. Lystra observes that with the cultural ascendancy of romantic love during the period, sex became an acceptable and even sacred component of a loving relationship. She writes that "both men and women saw sexual desire as the natural physical accompaniment and distillation of romantic love. . . . Properly sanctioned by love, sexual expressions were read as symbolic communications of one's real and truest self, part of the hidden essence of the individual." Moreover, Lystra argues that Americans saw children as precious symbols of romantic love. Thus motherhood and sexuality were not necessarily incompatible, for sexual enjoyment could be justified and sanctified by romantic love and by parenthood.[25]

[23] Paula Treckel, "Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 20 (Summer 1989), 31; Ruth Perry, "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2 (Oct. 1991), 209; Smith, *Female Monitor*, 76. Emphasis in original.

[24] Smith, *Female Monitor*, 70, 45.

[25] Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 59, 77. While the work of Karen Lystra, along with the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Clare A. Lyons, has expanded to consider other attitudes toward sex, the concept of sexual repression still tends to dominate observations of nineteenth-century culture. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America," in "Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family," supplement, *American Journal of Sociology*, 84 (Fall 1978), S212–S247, esp. S212; and Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

Representations of breast-feeding and discussions of marital relations hinted at an evolving attitude toward sexuality and romantic love. The erotic undertones in advice manuals implied willingness to explore women's capacity for sexual enjoyment even in the context of sentimental motherhood. At times the authors offered voyeuristic descriptions of the pleasures of breast-feeding, with a husband's enjoyment situated in his gaze. Dewees imagined a scene in which the viewer perceived the "external signs" of the mother's physical pleasure while the mother appreciated the "writhing" of the infant at her breast from "excess of joy." Smith's evocation of maternal bliss pointed even more explicitly to the enjoyment of the husband gazing at his nursing wife, "the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth." Whether these men understood that breast-feeding could in fact stimulate some of the same sensations as sexual activity, or whether they merely applied the same erotic possibilities to the lactating breast as to the explicitly sexualized breast is unclear. Nevertheless, their descriptions of breast-feeding evoked inescapably erotic possibilities.[26]

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

> ensures the fulfillment of the promises made by the best writers on this subject—speedy recovery from child-bed, the firm establishment of good health, the exquisite sense of wedded joys, the capacity of bearing more children, the steady attachment of her husband, the esteem and respect of the public, the warm returns of affection and gratitude from the objects of her tender care, and after all, the satisfaction to see her daughters follow her example and recommend it to others.

Buchan's ideal maternal script connected the "exquisite sense of wedded joys" to childbearing and marital affection and respect. Although he did not specify exactly which wedded joys were at stake, he implicitly tied the sexual enjoyment of the husband and wife to the satisfaction of the good mother.[27]

The issue of maternal sexuality provides a framework for exploring two of the most commonly shared female experiences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: sex and motherhood. The vast majority of women would become mothers in the course of their lives, but their experiences with sexuality and with motherhood varied widely. The discourse surrounding breast-feeding and ideal motherhood did not describe the lived experience of American mothers; nevertheless, most women were exposed to published writings and images of motherhood or to the advice of physicians, midwives, friends, and relatives. Such messages influenced women's private lives and provided a possible framework for understanding their experiences and place in society.

[26] Dewees, *Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children,* 55–56; Smith, *Female Monitor,* 76. On the physiological correlation between sexual arousal and the sensation of breast-feeding, see, for example, Robbie Pfeufer Kahn, *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth* (Urbana, 1995). On the tension between the maternal and the sexual breast, see, for example, Cindy Stearns, "Breastfeeding and the Good Maternal Body," *Gender and Society,* 13 (June 1999), 308–25.

[27] Buchan, *Advice to Mothers,* 61.

The personal writings of white middle-class and elite women did not always correspond to the ideals published in the guides that were written for their edification. Privately, women wrote about breast-feeding in ways that revealed ambivalence toward sentimentalism and an eagerness to offer their own advice and opinions about mothering. This was an experience with which they were intimately acquainted—certainly more so than were male advice manual authors—and women writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remarked frequently on nursing, weaning, and the general health of their children. Sometimes these references to breast-feeding expressed the pleasure that women derived from the practice. More often they were simply matter-of-fact statements about daily cares or descriptions of the discomfort, pain, and frustration that women endured in attending their maternal duties.

To be sure, sometimes women echoed the sentiments of the advice manuals. Writing in her diary in 1857, Rebecca Turner expressed her attachment to nursing: "How am I to relinquish so sweet an office—that of giving nourishment to my darling? Are these foolish tears that dim my eyes when I think of the times, when he will no longer nestle in my bosom through the silent watches of the night?" Her attitude toward nursing placed her within the framework of sentimental motherhood, emphasizing the emotional and physical intimacy of breast-feeding as one of her most treasured tasks. Knowing the importance and enjoyment that was attached to breast-feeding, women sometimes expressed fear that their friends or relatives might persist in nursing even if ill health rendered it inadvisable. Harriet Allston of South Carolina advised her sister to avoid breast-feeding, insisting that "to nurse her when you are not at all able would be a selfish gratification entirely." Other women evoked the pleasure of breast-feeding and criticized mothers who did not nurse. Sarah Cary, who traveled between New England and the West Indies, inquired in a letter, "Tell me, my dear, if you intend, like other town ladies to sacrifice the pleasure of nursing the dear one to *fashion*? If you do I pity you, for you are possessed of too much sensibility to do it without giving yourself great pain." For Cary, the neglect of breast-feeding called a woman's maternal dedication into question and also lessened maternal happiness. Other women were even more explicitly critical of mothers who did not or could not nurse their children. "She has a sweet good babe," wrote Eleanor Lewis of a mother and her newborn, "but she is a helpless Mother, she cannot suckle it, and knows very little about the care of children. I hope you will see *my* little treasure next autumn, and his *devoted* Mother." Breast-feeding could be a meaningful and precious aspect of motherhood but could also divide good mothers from bad. In this respect, some women ascribed to the idea that breast-feeding was a pleasure and a duty that defined ideal motherhood. Yet women seemed to focus more on the emotional pleasure of breast-feeding and did not dwell as explicitly on its physical pleasures as did prescriptive authors. The sensuality and eroticism seen in advice manuals seemed to have no place in individual mothers' personal writings.[28]

[28] Rebecca Allen Turner, "Little Jesse's Diary," Aug. 29, 1857, Jesse Turner Sr. Papers (Manuscript Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.). Also cited in Sally McMillen, "Mother's Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterns among Middle- and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, 51(no. 3, 1985), 333. Harriet Allston to Adele Allston, Jan. 8, 1838, Allston Family Papers (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston). Also cited in McMillen, "Mother's Sacred Duty," 346. Sarah Cary to Polly Gray, March 29, 1785, in *The Cary Letters, edited at the request of the family*, ed. Caroline G. Curtis (Cambridge, Mass., 1891), 67. Emphasis in original. Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, June 24, 1827, in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794–1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, S.C., 1991), 191. Emphasis in original.

Figure 1. "Portrait of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby, ca. 1848." *Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.*

Some women supplemented their writing about breast-feeding by visually articulating the importance of the act as a symbol of good mothering. A daguerreotype from 1848, one of several portraits from the antebellum era, shows a mother seated with one breast exposed and her child in the act of nursing. (See figure 1.) Although mother-and-child portraits were not uncommon with the advent of photography in the late 1830s, most displayed the mother with her child in her arms or at her side. The frank display of this mother's bare breast is surprising, yet by visualizing the intimate physical connection between mother and child, the portrait privileged the same mother-infant bond that nineteenth-century advice manuals idealized. That the mother was nursing the infant rather than merely holding it verified her maternity—she *was* a mother, the real thing, and this image provided enduring evidence that she was fulfilling her duty to nourish her child. Portraits such as this one spoke to the practical and symbolic importance of breast-feeding. But what did the portrait mean to the mother? Unfortunately, her identity is lost and with it the story of this moment as it was captured in black and white. Perhaps the portrait reminded her of duties faithfully fulfilled; perhaps it spoke to her of maternal love; perhaps it reminded her of past pleasures and intimate moments. Whatever her story, it is significant that this image captured the mother in the very act of performing that sacred maternal duty.

Although some mothers sentimentalized breast-feeding, most often it was a part of their lives that required neither dramatic commentary nor sentimental expression. Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, a pioneer and missionary to Oregon, wrote calmly of the birth of her daughter in 1837 and commented that the baby "sleeps all night without nursing more than once sometimes not at all." Caroline Laurens wrote with similar tranquility about weaning her son: "John was weaned from his mother's breast. She, finding herself 4 months gone in pregnancy, was obliged to do—he was easily weaned. Whenever he woke at night, he would ask for 'tee tee' his mother would tell him it was all gone. He would

repeat the words 'all gone' . . . and go quietly to sleep." Elizabeth Drinker, a member of a prominent Philadelphia Quaker family, also wrote that she "began this Morning to Ween my Sally,—the Struggle seems now (April 2) partly over.—tho it can scarcely be call'd a Struggle she is such a good-natur'd patient Child." The cycles of pregnancy, birth, breast-feeding, and weaning were regular parts of women's adult lives that might be noted without fuss or ceremony.[29]

At times, however, women articulated their experiences of breast-feeding as a painful and damaging act, one that was far from the pleasurable experience that advice manuals promised. Drinker wrote of her daughter Nancy that "it is one of her breasts that the fever has fallen in, as she suckles; poor dear girl, her baby so lately recover'd, her mind as well as body afflicted." Following the birth of her child, Mary Walker Richardson, a native of Maine and a pioneer to Oregon, recorded on a daily basis the pain and difficulty she experienced in her attempts to breast-feed. "Nipples very sore. Worry with my babe. Get all tired out," she wrote one day, only to continue on the next with, "Milk so caked in my breasts, have apprehensions of 2 broken breasts." By the end of the week, she complained of "Very little strength on account of suffering so much with my breasts." For several weeks, Richardson continued to write of her discouragement and ill health. Although she had greater success in suckling her next child, her diary entries continued to expose the grim difficulties faced by many nursing mothers.[30]

Some women's diary entries reveal that mothers did not always share the beliefs of advice manual authors who insisted that breast-feeding was healthful for both mother and child. Women feared the ill effects of breast-feeding on their own health and that of female friends and family. Drinker recorded in her diary that "Molly Rhoads was here forenoon, she has made a beginning to wean her Son, having a great weakness in her Eyes. . . . She has been told it is owning to her suckling such a strong lusty boy—and was told of a person who lost her sight by it—that after her child was wean'd, her sight was restored." Most women attributed more vague or general health problems to breast-feeding, as did Eleanor Lewis when she wrote that "my Beloved Parke is better and I trust improving rapidly—she has been very weak and thin, and almost destroy'd herself by nursing." The British diarist Frances Kemble agreed that breast-feeding could be debilitating for women. "I attribute much of the wretched ill health of young American mothers to over nursing," she wrote, "and of course a process that destroys their health and vigour completely must affect most unfavourably the child they are suckling." Eliza Fisher wrote to her mother: "You will be glad to hear I daresay, what I am quite sorry to tell you—that I am about weaning dear Baby—I found that Nursing her 6 & 7 times a

[29] "Portrait of an unidentified woman breastfeeding a baby, ca. 1848" (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.). The Schlesinger Library holds three other daguerrotype images of breast-feeding women. Mrs. Marcus Whitman [Narcissa Prentiss Whitman], "Mrs. Marcus Whitman Diary, December 1836 to March 1837," in *First White Women over the Rockies,* vol. I: *Where Wagons Could Go: Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding,* ed. Clifford Merrill Drury (Glendale, 1963), 126; Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, 1823–1827, Dec. 30, 1825, Southern Historical Collection (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Physicians generally advised women to cease breast-feeding if they became pregnant to avoid contaminating or decreasing the quality of the milk. Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, "Wife and Mother, 1762–1775," in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman,* ed. Elaine Forman Crane (3 vols., Boston, 1991), I, 99.

[30] Drinker, Aug. 25, 1796, in *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker,* ed. Crane, II, 836; Mary Walker Richardson, Dec. 11, Dec. 12, Dec. 14, 1838, in *First White Women over the Rockies,* vol. II: *On to Oregon: The Diaries of Mary Walker and Myra Eells,* ed. Clifford Merrill Drury (Glendale, 1964), 136.

day weakened me so excessively, that I have had her fed oftener lately—& now my milk is diminishing so much that I cannot look forward to having enough to supply her during the summer." The Maine midwife Martha Ballard spent much of her time delivering babies and tending to the health of new mothers whose breasts had become painful and inflamed.[31]

Many mothers faced these common physical and emotional complications from breast-feeding and found themselves discouraged, fearful, ill, and uncomfortable. Even among those women who saw breast-feeding as a desirable and even sacred goal, references to breast-feeding reflected the challenging reality of daily efforts to maintain their own health and the safety of their children with limited medical aid. Even if they wished to nurse their own children, some women resigned themselves to hiring wet nurses or soliciting the services of lactating friends when they found the challenges of nursing insurmountable. The image of breast-feeding that emerges from these women's writings is more ambivalent than sentimental. Their descriptions of motherhood highlight a tension between the sentimental maternal ideal that was prevalent in advice manuals and the reality of women's personal experiences as mothers.

The ambivalence that individual women felt toward the sentimental maternal ideal, however, did not negate its salience as a cultural script in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The biology of women's bodies designated them as child bearers and nurses and, indeed, most adult women did experience repeated cycles of childbearing and child rearing with varying degrees of pleasure and discomfort. Yet popular representations of motherhood also defined women as sentimental mothers and described the experience of mothering as one of unmitigated joy and importance for the individual, the family, and society. Advice manuals highlighted the ways the physical pleasure of breast-feeding cemented both parental and marital bonds of love, but real mothers often struggled emotionally and physically to fulfill their duties. Advice manuals presumed that women's natural sensibilities would induce them to cherish the task of child rearing, for women were thought able to embrace intuitively the physical and emotional attributes of the ideal mother. A woman who failed to do so could only be an unnatural or deviant woman—"a monster," as William Buchan wrote. Lydia Sigourney argued that "the love of children, in man is a virtue: in woman, an element of nature. It is a feature of her constitution, a proof of His wisdom, who, having entrusted to her the burden of the early nurture of a whole race, gave that sustaining power which produces harmony, between her dispositions, and her allotted tasks." Whereas in the mid-eighteenth century William Cadogan had written that women lacked the proper knowledge—"to be acquired only by learned Observation and Experience"—to be good mothers and thus required education by men, the increasing emphasis on sentimental motherhood privileged the "natural" abilities and affections of women. Women, or at least good women, fulfilled naturally and instinctively the

[31] Drinker, Dec. 7, 1802, in *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker,* ed. Crane, II, 1597; Lewis to Bordley, April 27, 1827, in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly,* ed. Brady, 188; Frances Anne Kemble, April 1, 1839, in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839,* ed. John A. Scott (New York, 1961), 296; Eliza Fisher to her mother, April 8, 1841, in *Best Companions: Letters of Eliza Middleton Fisher and Her Mother, Mary Hering Middleton, from Charleston, Philadelphia, and Newport, 1839–1846,* ed. Eliza Cope Harrison (Columbia, S.C., 2001), 202; Martha Ballard, *The Diary of Martha Ballard, 1785–1812,* ed. Robert R. McCausland and Cynthia McAlman McCausland (Rockport, 1992), 269, 410.

sentimental role of the ideal mother, who exemplified "true domestic bliss, / The fountain of maternal love, / Welling with happiness."[32]

Two sides to the maternal ideal remained at the beginning of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, motherhood elevated women's status in society; on the other hand, it subjected women to an exacting standard that the realities of mothering could rarely match. By obeying nature, being affectionate, chaste, healthy, tender, and nurturing, and—above all—by breast-feeding, mothers could embody the maternal ideal and gain a greater degree of recognition and authority than they could achieve merely as women. While the nursing mother enjoyed the pleasures of breast-feeding her child, she simultaneously became the affectionate moral and spiritual guardian of society, for "the *mistress* and *mother* of a family occupies one of the most important stations in the community." From the mother's breast flowed the moral influence on which society depended. Sigourney, writing in a confidential tone, reinforced the importance of a mother's power: "My friend, if in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness, you have also taken a higher place in the scale of being. A most important part is allotted you, in the economy of the great human family." Sigourney did not mince words; in being a mother, she wrote, "You have gained an increase of power."[33]

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

[32] Buchan, *Advice to Mothers,* 30. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers,* 46. Cadogan, *Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children,* 3; Mrs. E. W. Robins, "On a Mother and Her Infant," *Mother's Assistant and Young Lady's Friend,* 8 (May 1846), 107.

[33] Taylor, *Practical Hints to Young Females,* 2–3. Emphasis in original. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers,* 9, 10.