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Breasts & the Beestings: Rethinking Breast-Feeding Practices, Maternity Rituals, & Maternal Attachment in Britain & Ireland

By Susan Hogan¹

Abstract

Viewing the wider collective rituals of childbirth as liminal is helpful in understanding the highly contested nature of many cultural practices. With English & Irish historical examples, this essay will argue that it has been to the advantage of women that they maintain a wide range of post-partum taboos and rituals. The themes of post-partum pollution and female power are developed in the context of wet-nursing and the withholding of colostrum. 'Churching', evident in the medieval period in Britain, continues to this very day, though in a simplified form. The colostrum taboo and ideas about the transmission of personality via breast milk are very ancient ideas, now entirely discredited in a British context, though to breastfeed another's baby is now socially taboo. Ideas about how the passions of the nurse could spoil her milk and cause diseases in the child were still widespread in the nineteenth century, and there are resonances of these ideas evident today in beliefs about how pregnant women's emotions might damage her developing foetus.

Theoretically, this article illustrates how anthropological ideas can enrich our understanding of cultural history.

Keywords: liminality, taboos, motherhood, breast-feeding, deviancy, rituals

Introduction

I shall discuss this in further depth, but mothers giving birth may be viewed as 'liminal' entities because they straddle the line between purity and pollution; self and other; and indeed life and death. The gossip feasting, which will be further described, had distinctly transgressive and therefore deviant aspects – again these can usefully be explored as 'liminal' events: events which challenge customary practises and add a disturbing element of indeterminacy. Or if I may put this more crudely, childbirth was, and remains, (perhaps because of its very liminality), a political, and ideological 'hot-spot' and a contested site with regards to male/female power relations, and the application of rituals; consequently, every aspect of the management of the event was potentially highly inflammatory, and subject to rival proscriptions.

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In this paper I will look at some historical ideas about rituals relating to childbirth and breast feeding, the latter often thought of as straightforward and unproblematic. Women had breast milk and fed their milk to their young didn't they? But actually, because childbirth is a particularly liminal area it is highly political, and also highly regulated, but the regulation is extremely contested. This is arguably an interesting way of approaching the subject matter.

Ideas about transmission of personality via breast milk will receive brief analysis in relation to the social regulation of women and with respect to deviant thinking.¹ Even what went on in women's minds—this supposedly private domain was represented as potentially dangerous and in need of regulation: their thoughts could damage a gestating foetus, or after birth, cut-off its milk.

Taboos about breast-feeding will be examined in relation to their links with purity rituals and potentially subversive² 'gossip feasts',³ which, along with the lying-in period, served to undermine customary power relations and class divisions.⁴ For example, women could not be 'churched' until their vaginal discharge (lochia) has stopped and 'unchurched' she could not re-join the community.⁵ In this liminal state, it was also thought she should not breastfeed, though this latter prohibition was not always observed. The essay will argue that it was to the advantage of women that they maintain such taboos and rituals. Childbed rituals functioned to give women in the early modern period, and beyond, opportunities to transgress the bounds of normally accepted female behaviour, and as such were domains of potential deviance thought to require male regulation and suppression.

Finally, the role of wet-nurses (lactating women who fed babies other than their own) will be re-examined in the light of recent anthropological research. This paper will suggest that women who experience high-rates of infant mortality develop a rather different sensibility toward their offspring, which is *not* indifferent, yet involves forming delayed attachments to offspring.

Liminality as a useful concept

The term 'liminal' is related to limin or threshold, but it is a term which has been used by anthropologists to indicate a transitional period: characterised by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. Anthropologist Victor Turner discusses, 'a liberation of human capacities' from 'normative constraints' and it may be the case that the usual confines regarding self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to a new way of being.⁶

Liminal events can be deeply disturbing. As Mary Douglas (1966) has pointed out, that which cannot be easily categorised leads to social anxiety and from there to suppression or avoidance:⁷ that which cannot be clearly classified, or that which falls between classificatory confines, may be regarded as 'polluting' or 'dangerous'.⁸ Ambiguous things can seem very threatening and taboos (post-partum purity rituals, or proscriptions about the type of milk to be given) serve to protect the distinctive categories of the universe. So, 'ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose systems on an inherently untidy experience.'⁹

Transitional periods, such as childbirth, are often marked by a rite of passage. These are moments of social instability from one social or religious state to another. Rites

of passage may be subject to highly proscribed forms of conduct; however, these rituals themselves may be constantly contested, and this is very much the case when one views the history of childbirth.

With respect to ritual purification following childbirth, rituals varied tremendously but a common element was a period of social exclusion, or if not exclusion then being prevented from performing some customary duties. Indeed, being secluded in a darkened room was common in earlier periods. Very often women were expected to remain indoors – hence the veil worn on the way to the ‘churching’ ceremony, which functioned, perhaps, to continue to keep her in an interior space of sorts. ‘Churching’ rituals were tremendously popular and very much in demand right into the twentieth century as a rite of passage back into the community; women who staggered drunk into their local church, following their ‘gossiping’ revels, to demand the rite, were really very miffed if the local clergyman refused to perform it. For others, as will be elaborated, it was more of a formal affair in which the new mother would process veiled (and sober) with her ‘gossips’ for a lengthy church service. Other rituals centred on the rejection of colostrum, or the ‘beestings’ as it was otherwise known, (the first – ‘green’ milk).

The gossip feasts surrounding childbirth and ‘churching’ rituals can be seen as ‘deviant’ insofar as they might be viewed as liminal phenomena. Ones, if we use Turner’s formulations (Turner 1974 & Turner & Turner 1978), which may be seen as betokening ‘the partial, if not complete, abrogation’ of secular social structures, rather than ‘reflecting or reinforcing’ them.¹⁰ In other words, it may have an *anti-structural* tendency.¹¹

There is considerable scholarly debate on the nature of liminality, which it is only within the scope of a short essay to briefly acknowledge. An anti-structural tendency attached to ritual enactments has been questioned, even by Turner himself, who of the liminal phase wrote:

‘The gaps between the positions, the interstices, are necessary to the structure. If there were no intervals, there would be no structure, and it is precisely the gaps that are reaffirmed in this kind of liminality. The structure as a whole equation depends on its negative as well as its positive signs.’¹²

In theologian Jan Berry’s (2006) critique of this idea, she writes:

‘...the potential for the overthrow of social status is contained, given a safe, time-limited boundaried expression which then allows the status quo to continue.’¹³

Given that the British and Irish gossiping revels I shall be exploring represent some of the most extreme forms of behaviour open to women at various historical junctures, the historical evidence rather contradicts Berry’s thesis above, which suggests that the *status quo* is never fundamentally threatened. An anti-structural tendency is also noted by Grimes (1993) who, for example, notes that all ritual is subject to change during the process of enactment.

'In most cultures ritualizing is socially anomalous. It happens on the margins, on the thresholds; so it is stigmatized by liturgical classicists and eulogized by ritual romantics. In either case it makes havoc of theories and definitions of ritual if we have built into them the notions of tradition, repetition, and collective participation.'¹⁴

Professor of Religious Studies, Catherine Bell (1992) supports the idea that 'ritualization can also promote the forces that have been traditionally thought to work against social stability and control.'¹⁵

Victor Turner (1969) describes the characteristics of liminality thus as, 'necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there.'¹⁶

Childbirth, and the rituals and taboos surrounding it, are sites of extreme contestation or liminality (or both). In the case of liminality, competing discourses find it hard to find purchase on the subject in hand: debates about infanticide and abortion are particularly good examples of this, and the lack of purchase on the topic is evident in literally centuries of debate on the subject; has a baby whose throat has been cut with a knife been murdered if at the moment of the incision the rest of it's body had not yet been born? Surely, it was as yet an 'unborn child?' it was asked in nineteenth century England by legal commentators.¹⁷ In contrast, in the 21st century a woman in North America who refused 'medical treatment' (a Caesarean Section) who went on to have a dead baby was accused of 'murdering her unborn child', what many of us might regard as a contradiction in terms. Both women were actually acquitted, but the argument over both cases was ferocious.¹⁸ These transitional or liminal moments are ideologically slippery if you like: indeterminate.

What about the women I actually want to discuss here - the 'deviant' mothers? Are they serene and unmoving ahistorical Madonnas in the midst of all this discussion of competing discourses? Once one enters into the realm of social relations, their experience of breast-feeding, for example, must be seen as diverse. Nothing must be taken for granted: the bonding; the mother love, even the pain of childbirth. Can pain, for example, which we would suppose to be a brute fact, be said to be experienced in the same way across cultures? Having seen protagonists with their flesh pierced through with metal rods processing (supposedly in a state of bliss) through the streets of Singapore during religious festivals, I have been left believing that basic physical experiences are in fact culturally mediated in the way that they are individually experienced.

To continue briefly with the example of pain, pain in childbirth is interpreted through a cultural lens and in some cultures women who have performed their duties well are not expected to endure excessive pain and are exhorted not to cry out, as in some parts of contemporary rural India, for example.¹⁹ In other cultures, excessive pain might be associated with previous infidelity. The Lele of the Kasai in Zaire, for example, (in the late 1950's), revealed such infidelity during the birth of a child:

'A girl was supposed to have no secrets from her mother, and men would express amazement at their lack of reserve.... A girl confided her extra-marital adventures to her mother. Then, when the girl was in labour her mother would be able to

reveal the names of her lovers, so that the delivery would be speedy & safe.'²⁰

In contrast, today's Japanese women expect childbirth to be painful and have a phrase: *Onaka-wo-itameta-ko*, which translates as, the child who gave me so much pain is special, is dear to me.²¹

This paper asserts that viewing the wider collective rituals of childbirth as liminal is extremely helpful in understanding the highly contested nature of many cultural practices, and I have provided examples above which illustrate the conceptual problems which childbirth can raise, particularly with respect to the status of the foetus/yet unborn child, as a liminal entity. With historical examples from England and Ireland, this essay will now look at arguments which support the idea that it was to the advantage of women to maintain a wide range of pre and post-partum rituals. The theme of postpartum pollution and female power will be developed with particular reference to the withholding of colostrum. Though it is not within the scope of this journal article, whilst looking at breast feeding taboos, it does seem important to acknowledge the longstanding taboo about avoiding sexual intercourse whilst breast feeding.²² Furthermore, some women were prevented from breast-feeding, because some husbands wanted sexual congress and would not allow breast feeding to continue. I recognise that this latter topic requires a paper in its own right.

Colostrum & Animal Suckling

Colostrum, a mother's first milk also known as 'green milk' or 'beestings' appears to have become synonymous with a disease, 'beestings' in the early seventeenth Century thought to be caused by imbibing the beast (probably because of the appearance of the milk).²³ Though by the late seventeenth Century medical authorities had begun to challenge the widespread taboo about feeding colostrum to the newborn, the historian Valerie Fildes argues that these new pronouncements probably did not penetrate the norms established around not feeding colostrum, as few mothers would have wanted to do something harmful to their newborn.²⁴ The rejection of colostrum was an immensely enduring and well established taboo; even the great philosopher Aristotle (348-22 B.C.E) thought, erroneously, this first milk to be unsuitable.²⁵

As has been well documented, the green milk has all kinds of health giving properties. The mother's immune defences are transmitted to the baby via this milk. Colostrum lasts for about two weeks (though changes its appearance after three or four days to look like normal breast milk).²⁶ Colostrum contains cells which 'engulf' infective organisms in the newborn baby's gut, and 'liberate several protective proteins.' Additionally, it is high in zinc.²⁷ The antibodies contained within the colostrum are transmitted to the newborn to fight bacterial infection, and the milk is particularly nutritious.

The important point is that infants who were breast-fed by their mothers from birth had a much better chance of survival, because of their enhanced ability to fight infections, than the babies who were 'wet nursed' while the mother had the beestings, or those infants who were fed alternative foods from non-sterile containers. Thus, the change in attitudes about the meaning of colostrum is extremely significant in terms of early infant survival.

Fildes survey of early childcare handbooks found evidence that beestings was generally thought harmful to the baby throughout pre-industrial Europe. There were a number of reasons put forward for this. The mother had not been 'churched' for example. Churching, a thanksgiving of women after childbirth, also served as a ritualistic cleansing ceremony which welcomed the woman back into the community from her liminal state.²⁸

It is likely that this ceremony goes back to ritual impurity after childbirth, according to Jewish law. Purity is, of course, a religious ideal and ideas of purity and impurity are important elements of many ancient religions, but it is probable that 'churching' has Jewish origins in the concept of *tumah ve-toharah*; this is an idea that a person or object, under religious law, can be in a state which prohibits the person from having contact with their cult or temple.²⁹ In the Jewish tradition a woman was considered ritually unclean until her purification bath in the *mikvah*.³⁰

The fact that a sacrifice would have been required under Jewish religious law indicated that childbirth was regarded as a strong form of ritual uncleanness and of potential defilement. In Leviticus, purification could include 'the washing of the clothes of the unclean person (eg., Lev. 11: 25, 28) and [for] still greater degrees [of pollution], the offering of a sacrifice (Lev. 5: 6 ff)'.³¹

In Leviticus it is stated that, 'A woman is unclean for a period of seven days after giving birth to a male child and 14 days after a girl' (Lev.12: 6 ff). Then for a 'period of 33 additional days after a boy and 66 after a girl (Lev. 12: 4, 5), she is forbidden to enter the temple or to touch hallowed things. The purification is completed on the bringing of a sacrifice (Lev. 5: 6 ff)'.³² Whilst the sacrificial aspect had been dropped by the nineteenth Century, a new mother was not accepted back into her community or church prior to the 'churching ritual', which in the twentieth Century became a church based thanksgiving ceremony (it is in the Book of Common Prayer), but in the nineteenth century it may have still retained a ritualistic bathing rite of some sort: 'Bathing is also common to all purity rituals, even where it is not expressly specified.'³³

Certainly, in the sixteenth century there is a suggestion of 'bathing' taking place: 'If she be not defiled by childbirth, why do they separate her? *Why do they cleanse her?*' demanded Henry Burrows.³⁴ Thomas Cartwright (1573) notes the influence of "Jewish religion" on the practice, noting that the "accustomed offering" made by women at churching "carrieth [sic] with it a strong sent and suspicion of a sacrifice".³⁵ Indeed, the earlier ritual on which churching was based still contained the use of water. In the *Missale ad Usus Ecclesiae Sarum*,³⁶ the new mother was covered with a veil, had prayers said over her and was then sprinkled with holy water before being led into the church by a priest saying, "Enter into the temple of God, that thou mayest have eternal life,"³⁷ or "Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop' (hyssop being the herb used to cleanse sacramental vessels).³⁸ Historian Cressy (1993) illustrates that tremendous latitude was given to ministers as to how they performed the rite.³⁹ Social practices clearly varied a great deal, and there was considerable regional variation. This is a key point because childbed rituals, and the accompanying rites around them, since they were so varied, left leeway for what several recent theorists have called the process of 'ritualizing': essentially this involves a creative process of 'provocative, and innovative ritualizing; constructing ritual, cultivating attitudes, moulding awareness, exploring relationships, and redefining religious practice.'⁴⁰ These were liminal events.

'The Churching of Women' as an Anglican service is officially called 'The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, Commonly Called the Churching of Women' (since the 1552 edition), but in 1549 the official title was 'The Purification of Women.' The content of the service did not change when the name change took place.⁴¹ To say that a woman was 'churched' 'implies that she was restored to church membership in some sense', as theologian Hefling (2006) points out, 'and she is meant to receive Communion at the same time: Communion being the defining act and privilege of a church member. This suggests, perhaps, that she had been somehow excluded but there is nothing [in the text of the thanksgiving] to suggest reasons for the exclusion... It's possible, of course, that the idea of purification was simply taken for granted by all concerned. The Prayer Book Service is, perhaps, capable of being so interpreted.'⁴²

Looking at how women understood the ceremony in earlier periods, Cressy (1993) argues that the term 'churching' was thought to suggest a ritualistic end to 'banishment' or 'excommunication', implying therefore that the ceremony acted as purification.⁴³ The idea of 'Churching as a ritual whereby the impure were purified, was sufficiently well established to have aroused debate over several centuries. Such a ceremony was performed not only for women but for adulterers as well. Customs varied from parish to parish but in some it was regarded as unlucky for the woman to leave her home prior to the churching ceremony – the aspect of ritual seclusion being maintained. Consequently, the 'churching' ceremony was sometimes said in private homes. Thomas (1997) suggests that the ceremony held a 'semi-magical significance in the popular imagination' and that it was a common superstition that it was 'improper for the mother to emerge from her house, or to look at the sky or the earth before she had been purified'.⁴⁴ Historian Nathalie Knodel (1995) adds that the ritual was very much in demand.⁴⁵ Cressy (2003) too makes a case for the popularity of the ritual of churching, and also illustrates very high rates of participation.⁴⁶ In certain historical periods, the ceremony was taken extremely seriously; in some areas a woman who died 'unchurched' could not be buried on consecrated ground⁴⁷. Under the reign of James I (1603-1625), for example, a woman could be excommunicated for not wearing a veil for a church based ceremony.⁴⁸ The ceremony, in periods of heightened sensitivity, was a potential indicator of puritan sensibilities and an indication of tolerance or intolerance towards 'allegedly Jewish, popish or superstitious practices'⁴⁹ and as such, churching may be seen in the context of ongoing attempts to regulate birthing practices, which included the instruction of midwives as to what rituals may or may not be permitted in the birthing chamber.⁵⁰ Early midwifery, it should be remembered, was regulated by the church:

'The only licensing to which midwives were subject was episcopal. When a midwife applied for a bishop's licence, she called worthy matrons [her gossips] to testify to her skill.'⁵¹

Tensions in liturgical practice were played out with reference to churching.⁵² As Cressy (1993) eloquently points out, routine religious observances:⁵³

'...served as primary points of contact between family and community, centre and periphery.... Their rhythms and messages were made familiar through frequent

reiteration. This framework of uniformity provided recurrent opportunities to challenge as well as to sanction the established order.⁵⁴

‘Gossip feasts’ in the Irish context could refer to the immediate post-birth revels or those which took place after the churching ceremony. Gossip feasts following childbirth were popular and the new mother as ‘unhallowed’ not permitted to touch the meat or drink offered to guests.⁵⁵ Historian Tait’s (2003) examination of sixteenth and seventeenth Century local government records, following attempts by local government to regulate gossip feasts in Ireland, gives a tantalising glimpse of an event that, if not unruly, was certainly thought to be so by the male regulators – and as such potentially deviant. Such occasions were thought to waste precious sources of food; to leave households with insufficient means after the close of revels. Furthermore, all and sundry could descend upon a respectable household to cause chaos. These unruly ‘shameless, idle women lacking in good maners and habilitie’ [sic] could insinuate themselves upon honest households and corrupt them, turning household associates to ‘dishonesty’ and ‘slander’ and acting as a ‘hindrance’ to the proper regulation of the home; that special police officers were funded to regulate these events and fines imposed for gossip feasting, clearly illustrates how threatening to the *status quo* such events were perceived to be, events where groups of women could get together to malign and ‘slander’ the male regulators.⁵⁶ Even the sovereign’s wife could be importuned; clearly, no one was safe.⁵⁷ These injunctions (fines etc) Tait conjectures to be ‘part of wider schemes to impose respectable standards of behaviour’ on those that they governed.⁵⁸ However, the unique status of the feasting is overlooked in Tait’s analysis.

There is some dispute amongst historians regarding the significance of churching. Historian Knodel (1995) notes that ‘churching’ should be seen in the context of ‘protection’ given to pregnant women from the Middle Ages. Following historians Martin’s (1990)⁵⁹ and Cressy’s (1993) argument that the celebration surrounding churching was a collective female occasion following a period of postpartum privilege,⁶⁰ Knodel argues that churching should be seen as an important confirmation of women’s experience as worthy of celebration: ‘This is not to deny expressions of misogyny in Christian theology or the re-introduction of ideas of female impurity altogether’, she adds.⁶¹ Wilson’s interpretation is slightly different in that he sees the significance of churching as serving to legitimate the ‘wider ceremony of childbirth’: the lying-in period which was carefully regulated by her gossips (often including her own mother); the all female conviviality and potential for unruly and profligate feasting; the concomitant ‘reversal’ of power-relations between wife and husband,⁶² or if not quite a ‘reversal’ certainly an important interruption to the normal pattern of conjugal and other relations including the woman’s customary labour and child-care duties.⁶³ Wilson’s thesis is very persuasive. This notion of ‘reversal’ is not that which was more prevalent in the early modern period, the comic reversal of sexual roles which ‘toys with the accepted social hierarchy in ways that can amuse both sexes’ which ultimately provides both a ‘humorous debunking of authority and a subtle reinforcement of it.’⁶⁴ Rather as Gowing (1994) asserts, the management of pregnancy and childbirth was important as a ‘female area of power’.⁶⁵

Such an interpretation is also supported by Bell’s (1992) work on processes of ritual enactment:

'I will use the term 'ritualization' to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian activities.'⁶⁶

The subversive potential of the gossipings held around the churching ceremony as mainly female and cooperative is noted by a seventeenth century commentator in *The Woman's Advocate* (1683) thus:

'For gossips to meet... at a lying-in, and not to talk, you may as well dam up the arches of London Bridge, as stop their mouths at such a time. 'Tis *a time of freedom, when women... have a privilege to talk petty treason.*'⁶⁷

Cressy (1993) notes attempts to regulate gossip feasting in England too.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the unruly aspect of these events is also noted:⁶⁹ 'Alcohol flowed so abundantly on these occasions that writers of Stuart comedy could joke about characters "as drunk as a women a gossiping".⁷⁰ Churching feasts were an aspect of women's self-determination:

'Churchings formed part of the townswoman's round of "daily gadding with her gossips to banquets and bridals". According to Margaret Cavendish, a newly married woman might spend much of her time "at labours, christenings, churchings, and other matrimonial gossipings and meetings". Foreign visitors remarked on the freedom of English wives to gad outside the home, "making merry" at "childbirths, christenings, churchings, and funerals".^{71 72}

Gossiping revels were frequently the subject of critical sermons and the subject of popular print images which linked childbed gossiping to excessive alcohol consumption. Of one particular seventeenth century example of this genre, anthropologist Elizabeth Hallam concludes, 'the spaces of women's work, worship and ritual are exposed as zones of disorderly rabble as their rattling tongues and unruly bodily urges are linked to drunkenness, dirt, violence and vanity.'⁷³ I think it not coincidental that in the first scene women are drinking alcohol and chatting at a 'child-bed'.⁷⁴

Thus a further elaboration of attempts to regulate, or indeed, to stamp-out these practices, should prove particularly illuminating. Again, if we regard the wider collective ritual of childbirth as liminal then Turner's remarks are again pertinent: pointing out that the ritual subject 'has rights and obligations *vis-à-vis* others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he [sic] is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding the incumbents of social positions in a system of such positions.'⁷⁵

As Wilson puts it:

‘The ritual of childbirth was constructed and maintained by women *because it was in the interests of women*; and it represented a successful form of women’s resistance to patriarchal authority.’⁷⁶

Wilson asserts that ‘the collective ritual of childbirth’ was an integral part of women’s culture.⁷⁷ Therefore, attempts to regulate such events, whilst linked to larger social movements, were also moves to reduce the licence of women whose behaviour could be seen as deviant.

The fact that breast-feeding was considered taboo prior to ‘churching’ would have meant that many women would have been unable to feed the colostrum to their offspring.⁷⁸ Another common reason for not allowing the new mother to breast-feed is that she should simply be allowed to rest without the demands of breast feeding following the exertions of having given birth. Mothers who had received a shock or trauma might also be advised not to breast-feed; if stressed their milk might dry-up or, worse, damage their offspring. These taboos did not apply just to the colostrum period but throughout feeding. A nineteenth century writer, Thomas Bull, reiterated an earlier story about a nursing mother who breastfed her baby immediately after having separated her husband from another man as they fought; the baby immediately died in her arms.⁷⁹ A particularly stressful or traumatic delivery could lead to women being advised not to suckle. Other writers worried that if the baby was passing meconium that the milk and meconium might coagulate in the baby’s intestines.⁸⁰

Whatever the reasons for not putting the infant immediately to breast, the new mother would be left with massively engorged breasts which would need to be relieved. Though it may seem bizarre to the modern reader, the first milk would be drawn off by other women with suckling glasses or by a puppy dog. A ‘lusty’ older child who was keen to suckle was another alternative, ‘They may let children or little whelpes sucke their breast, whereby they draw out the milk that is fixed fast in their dugges [sic].’⁸¹

Certainly ritual purification of women following childbirth and taboos about the actions of the new mother were ubiquitous and the ‘idea of ritual impurity of women as the basis of such a rite’ was current to the mid-twentieth Century.⁸² As Hefling (2006) points out, the idea of purification was probably simply taken for granted in the later ceremony. Tait (2003) concurs that the ceremony in Ireland retained, until the mid-twentieth century, ‘echoes’ of its earlier role as a rite of purification.⁸³ Furthermore, though there are undeniably misogynist overtones in the idea that female babies were more polluting than males etc., the idea of ritual purification *per se* isn’t necessarily offensive and forms a simple part of many religious practices, wafting oneself with incense on entry to a Zen Buddhist monastery, or washing ones feet to enter a Brahman temple, and so forth.

By the beginning of the early twentieth century the colostrum taboo appears, finally, to have been extinguished; ‘churching’, however, continued as a thanksgiving ceremony as a part of the Book of Common Prayer.

Transmission of Personality Traits via Breast Milk

The idea of the transmission of the nurse’s characteristics via the milk (whether the nurse be the mother or other employed) to the baby is very ‘ancient and widespread’.⁸⁴ Fidles suggests that before 1800 the nurse was seen as providing much

more than just nourishment to the baby, 'she was believed to transmit to the child, along with her ideas, beliefs, intelligence, intellect, diet and speech, all her other physical, mental and emotional qualities. Effectively, she was seen to be reproducing herself; the child *was* the nurse; an extero-gestate foetus.'⁸⁵

The nurse's passions were also thought to affect the quality of the breast milk.⁸⁶ This echoes the widespread idea that babies could be damaged in the womb via the mother if she was subjected to a fright, or the foetus could be marked by the mother's unsatisfied or uncontrolled desires and longings. Deviant motherhood is potentially dangerous motherhood. This sort of mother blaming transcends all modern mother blaming: thus, in the early modern period, the woman who while having sex with her husband thinks of a black man can go on to produce a black baby (or vice-versa) as reproof of her disloyalty; or the very passing thought of one's lover during an orgasm - albeit induced by one's husband, could induce the lover's resemblance in the child thus conceived. More mundane longings, for a certain food such as a bunch of grapes, could result in the baby being born with a disfiguring birthmark in the shape of an illusory bunch of grapes.⁸⁷ Maternal imagination was seen as potentially dangerous, or indeed lethal.

Though it was 'well established that a much closer relationship existed between mothers and the children they suckled than between mothers and children put out to nurse,'⁸⁸ there were more than emotional bonds at stake. That the wet-nurse was also thought to have an irredeemable influence on children's personality may be evinced by the fact that some sixteenth and seventeenth century wills left extra money to those children who were breastfed by their mother 'at the expense of those put out to nurse.'⁸⁹ Because of beliefs about the transmission of character via breast milk, those suckled by their mother would have been regarded closer to her in type.

Fildes notes that 'In the last decade of the eighteenth Century 'medical authors were still warning that passions (i.e. worries, shock, grief, anger etc.) of the nurse would badly affect her milk and cause diseases in the child', particularly epilepsy and convulsions.'⁹⁰ Samuel Johnson, born in Lichfield in 1709, a major intellectual of his day, is on record as believing that he contracted his general poor health and poor eyesight from his wet-nurse.⁹¹ In 1728 Daniel Defoe states 'categorically that nurture, in the form of breast milk, had more influence on the shaping of the child and his future than all the general powers of the parent.'⁹²

The colour of the milk was also viewed as an indication of the personality of the midwife which it was believed would be transmitted to the baby via the milk. Wet nurses were ideally sanguine. Yellow milk was thought indicative of cholera, a blue tinge as indicative of melancholy, and pale milk as phlegmatic.⁹³ The smell of the milk was also thought to indicate temperamental proclivities so that sharp tastes might indicate a hot and choleric nature, or sour tastes a cold, melancholic disposition (hot dry humours were associated with masculinity, accounting for men's 'honor, bravery, muscle tone, and general hardness of body and spirit', whereas 'cold, wet' humours were said 'to dominate women's bodies' and were related 'to their social qualities - deceptiveness, changeability, instability...').⁹⁴

Wet-nurses also suckled weak women in labour, and after the birth, as well as other sickly adults. McLaren (1985) gives an interesting example of a sick man who suckled the breasts of two women purportedly to rather different effects:

‘What made Dr Cajus in this last illness so peevish and so full of frets [was that] he suckt one woman (whom I spare to name) forward of conditions and of bad diet; and contrariwise so quiet and well, when he suckt another of contrary disposition; verily the diversity of their milks and conditions, which being contrary one to the other, wrought also in him that sucked them contrary effects.’⁹⁵

Clearly, it was not just on a susceptible infant that the wet-nurse’s personality was thought to prevail.

These ideas also had implications regarding attitudes to animal feeding. Foundling infants (those abandoned) who did not have a wet nurse (and some parishes had trouble finding a sufficient number of wet nurses) could be fed directly from the teat of an animal, such as a goat, and such were thought to become ‘very swift and nimble’. But the appraisal could be more negative with bestial qualities thought to predominate in the child. The idea that direct feeding of animal milk passed animal characteristics to the baby was still prevalent in the eighteenth century and consequently animal feeding was only used in cases of dire necessity. Apparently, the French did not share these superstitious beliefs about the transmission of animal qualities, and many of their foundling hospitals kept goats or asses on their premises to suckle infants (particularly those babies with syphilis).⁹⁶

Recently, when I offered to suckle a friend’s baby so she could attend a poetry reading, she demurred. This, very close friend, was well aware that, as part of my pre-natal screening, I had undergone now routine tests for HIV and other illnesses, so she *knew* I was healthy. There was something else at play at the discomfort she felt at the idea of her much loved friend suckling her infant.

Breast Feeding and Maternal Attachment

In historical periods in which infant mortality was often over 80% in the first year of life, wet-nursing also served as a means of the mother distancing herself from the child: if it survived to one year or eighteen months then it was welcomed back into the family. This corresponds to practices in other cultures in which the child might not be named until it has survived to one year, as will be elaborated. As Fildes notes,

‘Newly-delivered mothers who did not see their infants for hours, or sometimes days, would have had no opportunity to form any emotional bond so that the child who was fed with physick or food from a spoon, for several days, possibly in a different room, would have been a stranger to the mother when finally she was allowed to feed him... It is therefore not surprising that some mothers, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were apparently indifferent, and content to put their offspring out to nurse.’⁹⁷

I’d like to emphasise this phrase, ‘apparently indifferent, and content to put their children out to nurse’, which seems to baffle Fildes, but it is very illuminating in terms of indicating a profound difference in maternal expectations between now and then in Britain.

The Anthropologist Scheper-Hugh's (1993) work is relevant here; she argues that 'high expectancy of child death is a powerful shaper of maternal thinking and practice' as evinced, in particular, in delayed attachment to infants sometimes thought of as temporary "visitors".⁹⁸ I do not want to make a crude analogy between Scheper-Hugh's work in the Brazilian Alto de Cruzeiro and eighteenth and nineteenth maternal attitudes in Britain; however, as she puts it herself, there are 'some resonances and resemblances with mothering practices at other times.'⁹⁹

Scheper-Hugh's work is detailed and sophisticated and concerns the birth of babies who are perceived as having no *gusto*, no "taste" for life.¹⁰⁰ Through such a classification can lead to 'mortal neglect', the mothers are *not indifferent* to such babies. Scheper-Hughes is extremely critical of Edward Shorter's (1975) agreement with de Mause (1974) that in the early modern period, "mothers viewed the development and happiness of infants younger than two with indifference".¹⁰¹ As Scheper-Hughes points out 'mortal selective neglect, and intense maternal attachment coexist' in the Alto de Cruzeiro; however, what is distinctive is that the intense maternal attachment is delayed until the emotional investment in a suspect child seems warranted; or that the child simply does not die and begins to show an unanticipated 'talent' for life. Though maternal behaviour 'can play a final and definitive role' in the infants early demise. Nevertheless, a 'doomed' (*denada*) child can later 'win their way inside the domestic circle of protective custody and parental love.'¹⁰²

Scheper-Hughes is at pains to point out that the concept of 'mortal selective neglect' is not what in the U.S. is called 'child-abuse' (though there must be some cross-over) as it is not motivated by anger, hate or aggression towards the small baby,¹⁰³ rather it is characterised by a mother love which 'grows tentatively, and fearfully'.¹⁰⁴ As a result of very high infant mortality, her conclusion is that the 'Alto women's perception of infants as somewhat strange, transient, and undependable creatures seemed warranted'.¹⁰⁵

Scheper-Hughes argues that the repeated experience of infant death results in an existential doubt that 'allows the mother to reject as a child not worth keeping, a child without a knack for life.'¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, and despite the reality of the precariousness of life in shantytowns and slums, maternal expectations *did have a role in the premature death of infants*.¹⁰⁷ Many infants were seen as coming into the world sickly. The baby is seen as "as good as dead". As one of Scheper-Hugh's interviewees put it:

'They come into the world with an aversion to life. They are overly sensitive and soon fed up [abusado] with milk, with mingau – food doesn't interest them; it doesn't hold their attention. You see, they are neither here nor there.'¹⁰⁸

They are seen as neither here nor there; little is done to keep infants in this "transitional" or liminal state alive. Some of these babies are born looking quite normal but soon demonstrate that they have too little "resistance" or "fight". These babies die *'a mingua*, of slow and gradual neglect.' Sheper-Hughes elaborates:

'The term, a colloquialism, specifically indicates death from wasting. Its literal meaning is to "shrink" or "shrivel up". The same expression is used by women who have been recently abandoned by a husband or lover. They say their "worst fear" is that they will be left to die *a mingua*, abandoned and hungry... Most

infants presented as suffering from chronic and wasting child sickness are simply tiny famine victims whose hunger is often complicated by severe diarrhea [diarrhoea] and dehydration. The deaths can be painfully slow as babies summon an incredible energy to put up a final resistance, and the parents can suffer a great deal in the process. "It hurts the mother to see her baby delay so in dying," says Seu Manoel with reference to the death of a one-year-old daughter the year before from chronic child sickness. "The mother didn't cry but *I* cried for her, seeing our bit of nothing slowly disappear."¹⁰⁹

What killed Victorian babies in England? Commonly, it was 'wasting diseases' too. Wasting diseases included 'congenital defects'; 'injury at birth'; 'want of breast milk'; 'atrophy'; 'debility'; 'marasmus' and 'prematurity' were the main killers. 'Diarrhoeal Diseases' (including gastritis; enteritis as well as respiratory disorders) were the next biggest killers. 'Convulsions' came next. 'Common infectious diseases': diphtheria; scarlet fever; smallpox; whooping cough and measles, killed a relatively small proportion of infants.¹¹⁰

Wet-nursing practices in Britain allowed mothers a delayed attachment to infants in the way that Scheper-Hughes notes in modern Brazil. With 80% infant mortality being common and even higher rates of death for the babies of the poorest sections of British society a grim reality, the physical separation of mother and baby allowed a delayed bond to those infants who proved themselves, against the odds, to be viable.

Deadly Milk

It is also interesting to note, briefly, that the presence of breast milk could be fatal for a woman accused of murdering a child she claimed to be a premature miscarriage, or denied altogether. Accusations of murder might be brought by neighbours against a woman if milk were spotted on her clothing, next to her breasts.¹¹¹ In the eighteenth century, milk in a suspect's breasts was regarded as 'certain proof', by those interrogating her, of recent delivery.¹¹² Indeed, proof of recent delivery depended almost entirely in demonstrating the presence of milk; it was thought there could not be milk unless the pregnancy had gone full-term.¹¹³ Women were apt to confess, if guilty, once the milk had been drawn from her breast by the interrogating midwife; 'gossips' or a medical practitioner.¹¹⁴ Conversely, a woman who resolutely maintained that she had endured a spontaneous abortion, who had milk in her breasts, might be erroneously accused of concealment and committing murder.¹¹⁵

Summary & Conclusion

This paper has suggested that it is instructive to view the wider collective ritual of childbirth as liminal and that this is a useful way of understanding both the indeterminacy of mother and child and the highly contested nature of many practices, as well as the role of pre and post-partum taboos, which abounded. As Tait (2003) and Wilson's (1990) work illustrates, women's right to regulate the lying-in period and their customary collective celebrations were constantly challenged by male regulators, who also had influence over these occasions via midwives.

Early midwifery was regulated by the church. Possible tension between licensed midwives, (inculcated by church authorities to prevent certain ritualistic enactments, the

use of talismans, and icons), and the gossips they served, is an interesting area requiring further investigation. Wilson's excellent analysis is perhaps too linear in this respect in simply viewing the regulation of childbirth as a tension between men and women, though undoubtedly attacks on the rituals surrounding childbirth were motivated by a desire to control potentially deviant and unruly behaviour. Gossips were not necessary pro-women at all costs though.¹¹⁶ As historian Mark Jackson's (1996) work illustrates, gossips could also be instrumental in the regulation and interrogation of women accused of infanticide and active in bringing suspects to justice.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, in early modern England quasi-legal functions were performed by midwives at childbed in questioning unmarried mothers during their most painful contractions as to the paternity of the child, a necessity to prevent a financial burden on the Parish.^{118, 119}

Childbirth rituals were an important part of the construction and maintenance of a women's culture and an integral part of her freedom in earlier periods; such rituals gave women continuous opportunities to congregate without men, and this was, as illustrated, obviously threatening.

Some women with a will to nurse and an ample supply of milk may have been prevented from doing so because of social norms which insisted on the use of a wet-nurse for certain classes of women. The influence of the Protestant Reformation was significant in Britain, with the overwhelming majority of women suckling their own babies. Consequently, the taboos around the use of colostrum are of particular cultural importance to a British context. The colostrum taboo appears to have endured for over two-thousand years! The colostrum taboo, though particularly counter-productive in terms of infant welfare, appears to have served women's interests in terms of functioning to maintain female power in giving women a further domain over which to exercise control. The precise evolution of this taboo and the different forms it took -- its precise links with ritual cleansing and 'churching' ceremonies requires further more detailed, more finely-nuanced historical examination, and I hope this rather 'broad-brush' essay has generated interesting questions for future researchers to seize upon. The transmission of personality via the breast milk is a complex subject also requiring further investigation, but before 1800 it was clearly an important idea with a widespread influence.

The idea that the passions of the nurse (her worries, fears and anger) could affect her milk are no longer used as explanations for epilepsy or convulsions in infants; nor do we continue to believe in the transmission of particular characteristics (such as poor eyesight) via breast milk. Although some of the historical ideas about maternal deviant thinking damaging the foetus or drying-up the mother's milk supply, for example, might seem patently absurd to the modern reader, there is still an oppressive residue of such ideas in the twenty-first century idea that a woman's emotions during pregnancy *can affect* her unborn infant through creating different levels of a chemical, cortisol, in the baby's brain, which may be linked to the offspring later developing depression.¹²⁰ Such research findings are highly speculative and there is no real evidence that the normal emotions of everyday life have any long-term affects whatsoever on a gestating foetus, and I suspect that these new theories will be proved to be erroneous in due course.

Finally, this paper has suggested that women who experience high-rates of infant mortality develop a rather different sensibility toward their offspring, which is *not* indifferent, yet involves forming delayed attachments to offspring. The use of wet-nurses helped to create emotional distance. 'Wasting diseases' is a term which could easily

encompass selective mortal neglect. I shall explore the suggestion that selective neglect contributed to the high rates of infant mortality in Britain; this proposition will be elaborated and developed in a forthcoming paper.

Acknowledgements. I am indebted to the following academics for their help with the, surprisingly tricky, subject of ritual purification and churching: Dr Judith Maltby (Corpus Christi College, Oxford) and Associate Professor of Theology & Episcopal priest Dr Charles Hefling, (Boston College, MA), for points of clarification about the churching ceremony. I was also pleased to have anthropologist Mary Douglas's comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thank you to the academic Aki Katayama for the Japanese childbirth quotation. I would particularly like to thank the JIWS critical reader, clearly an astute scholar, for her detailed critical reading of this text, which has been invaluable in enabling me to whip this piece into shape.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my mother-in-law, Mary Douglas, who recently died, and has been my most important intellectual influence. Mary was continually encouraging and always willing to read and comment on my work in progress (she only got to see a very early draft of this particular paper). If I am a good academic today it is due, above all, to her ongoing constructive criticism and interest in helping my intellectual development.

¹ Fissel, M., E. 2004. Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England. Oxford University Press. p. 65-66.

² Wilson, Adrian. (1990). *The Ceremony of Childbirth & Its Interpretation* in Fildes, V. (ed.) Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren. London: Wellcome Institute.

³ Cressy, D. (1993) *Purification, Thanksgiving & The Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England*. Past & Present. Vol. 141. p. 107.

⁴ Adrian Wilson's analysis is strongly influenced by N. Z. Davies's work on France: Davies, N. Z. 'Women on Top', in *her Society and Culture in Early-Modern France*. London. See also Chaytor, *Household and Kinship*. P. 48-49.

⁵ Fildes, V. (1986) Breasts, Bottles and Babies. A History of Infant Feeding. Edinburgh University Press. p. 85.

⁶ Victor Turner. 1969. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. London: Routledge. p.201.

⁷ Mary Douglas. 1966. Purity & Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution & Taboo. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.15.

⁸ Victor Turner. 1969. The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure. Penguin. p.99.

⁹ Mary Douglas. 1966. Purity & Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution & Taboo. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.15.

¹⁰ John Eade & Michael J Sallow. 2000. Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. p.4.

¹¹ The unruly aspects of gossip feasting have elements in common with what Bakhtin has described as 'carnavalesque'.

¹² Victor Turner. 1969. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. London: Routledge. p.201.

¹³ Jan Berry. 2006. *Whose Threshold? Women's Strategies of Ritualization*. Feminist Theology. Sage. Vol. 14. Pt. 3. pp. 273-288.

¹⁴ Ronald L Grimes. 1993. Writing & Ritualizing: Ritual in Fictive, Liturgical & Public Places. Washington DC: The Pastoral Press. p. 12.

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- ¹⁸ Suzanne Goldenberg. 2004. 'Caesarean Refusal' *Mother in Jail*. The Observer. March 13th, 2004. p.2.
- ¹⁹ Patel & Sharma 2000 cited Hogan, S. (ed.) Gender Issues in Art Therapy. London: Jessica Kingsley. p.159.
- ²⁰ Mary Douglas. 1963. The Lele of the Kasai. Oxford University Press. p. 126.
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- ²² Yalom, M. (1998) The History of the Breast. London: Pandora. p. 209.
- ²³ The Oxford English Dictionary says that the origins of the term are unknown.
- ²⁴ Fildes, V. (1986) Breasts, Bottles and Babies. A History of Infant Feeding. Edinburgh University Press. p. 85. She found the first reference to colostrum as a good thing in a non Latinate text in 1776 by Rosenstein.
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- ²⁶ Nolan, M. (1996). Being Pregnant. Giving Birth. London: NCT Publishing. p. 190.
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- ²⁸ Free, Mary. 2003. Strange Bedfellows; "The Churching of Women" and The Taming of the Shrew. Florida International University (preview of piece for Renaissance Papers, 2004). <http://www.fiu.edu/~free/SRCchurchShrew.pdf> consulted 19/08/2006.
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- ³¹ Encyclopaedia JUDAICA. Vol. 13. p. 1405.
- ³² Encyclopaedia JUDAICA. Vol. 13. p. 1405.
- ³³ Encyclopaedia JUDAICA. Vol. 13. p. 1405.
- ³⁴ Burrows, Henry. The Writings of Henry Burrows 1587-1590. pp.462-3. Add place of publication.
- ³⁵ Cartwright, Thomas. 1573. A Replie to an Answere Made of M Doctor Whitegift cited Cressy, D. (1993). Purification, Thanksgiving & The Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England. Past & Present. Vol. 141. p.122.
- ³⁶ The 1549 prayer book provided a translation of the Sarum with 'only slight alterations.' Knodel, Nathalie April 1995, Section three: Perspectives for a Re-Consideration, reproduced by CTI Textual Studies, University of Oxford: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/church2.html> consulted 31/05/2006.
- ³⁷ Knodel, Nathalie April 1995 reproduced by CTI Textual Studies, University of Oxford: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/church.html> consulted 31/05/2006.
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- ³⁹ Cressy, D. (1993). Purification, Thanksgiving & The Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England. Past & Present. Vol. 141. p.120. Cressy is referring to the later version of the service in the Book of Common Prayer, where the service is introduced thus: that the priest "shall say these words, or such like as the case shall require". Nowhere else in the book is the minister given such latitude Cressy asserts.
- ⁴⁰ Lesley A. Northup. 1997. Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press. p.20.
- ⁴¹ I am indebted to Associate Professor of Theology & Episcopal priest Dr Charles Hefling of Boston College, MA. for this information. Personal correspondence 29/5/06.
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- ⁴³ Cressy, D. (1993). Purification, Thanksgiving & The Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England. Past & Present. Vol. 141. p. 123.
- ⁴⁴ Thomas, Keith. 1997. Religion & the Decline of Magic. Oxford University Press. p.38.
- ⁴⁵ Knodel, Nathalie. The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth Commonly called the Churching of Women. Section three: Perspectives for a Re-Consideration, reproduced by CTI Textual Studies, University of Oxford: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/church2.html> consulted 31/05/2006.

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- ⁵³ Non-historian readers may not be aware that the Act of Settlement of 1701 provided that only Protestants could hold the throne. It is therefore important when thinking about churching rituals, as well as bedside birthing rituals, to imagine what they might represent in the context of heightened sensitivities in certain historical periods.
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- ⁵⁵ Tait, C. 2003. *Safely Delivered: Childbirth, Wet-nursing, Gossip-Feasts and Churching in Ireland c.1530-1690. Irish Economic and Social History*. Vol. 30. p. 20.
- ⁵⁶ Tait, C. 2003. *Safely Delivered: Childbirth, Wet-nursing, Gossip-Feasts and Churching in Ireland c.1530-16-90. Irish Economic and Social History*. Vol. 30. p. 18.
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