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# Did French Women Love Their Children? The Contentious Image of Exotic Maternity in Early Modern French Travel Narratives

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DID FRENCH WOMEN LOVE THEIR CHILDREN?  
THE CONTENTIOUS IMAGE OF EXOTIC MATERNITY IN EARLY MODERN  
FRENCH TRAVEL NARRATIVES

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2015

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the period of early French colonization in the New World, travel writers commented extensively on Native American childrearing practices. Early modern French colonialists were particularly fascinated by the fact that native women almost always nursed their own children, unlike their French counterparts, who typically outsourced the labor of reproduction to wet nurses. French writers consistently pointed to the tendency of Native American women to nurse their own children as evidence of a superior sense of maternal duty, vehemently criticizing the custom of wet-nursing in France and the moral deficiencies of European women who participated in it.

Travel writers participated in a contemporary philosophical discourse on maternal duty in early modern France that also centered on the breast. In the mid-sixteenth century, intersecting philosophical, religious, and medical discourses combined to produce a new and particularly narrow domestic role for women that attached great cultural significance to maternal breastfeeding as the ideal expression of prescriptive maternity. French travel writers chose to focus on maternal breastfeeding in their observations of native life not only because it contrasted dramatically with social reality of early modern France, but as a result of certain literate preconceptions about proper gendered behavior. Sentimental representations of native motherhood cofunctioned with a medico-philosophical discourse that naturalized maternal breastfeeding and condemned hiring out the labor of

reproduction. In effect, by focusing on the benign “otherness” of native mothers, travel writers moralized the “otherness” of female vice at home, while linking poor mothering to the general moral degeneracy of civilized society.

Keywords: early modern France, motherhood, maternal idealism, gender, wet-nursing, French colonial America

To my mother.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF MOTHERHOOD

Travel writers devoted great attention to native motherhood and child-rearing practices throughout the first two centuries of French colonial ventures in the New World. This is nowhere more evident than in the colorful descriptions of the *moeurs*, or customs, of native peoples typically contained in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cosmographies and narratives of travels. Beyond merely observing and commenting on exotic customs, however, many French writers idealized maternal love among Native American women. More than one-sided praise, these writers pointed to an idealized, exotic mother-type as a means to comment on the deficient morality of French mothers. Writers in Brazil, the Caribbean, and Canada all included idealized descriptions of nursing native women in order to comment on breastfeeding as an appropriate maternal duty in early modern France.

One such writer who subscribed to this genre was humanist Marc Lescarbot, who assisted in the establishment of the ill-fated colony of Acadia. He included a remarkably scathing critique of French mothers in his *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* (1609) in a notable departure from a narrative otherwise centered on native life. Sandwiched between a semi-condemnatory description of child-rearing practices and the customary denunciation of native idolatry, Lescarbot unexpectedly turned the critical lens back onto Old France in his chapter “On the Feeding of Children.” He argued that North American

indigenous women demonstrated an unmatched degree of maternal love towards their children, as evidenced by the fact that they nursed their own children. On this point, he declares, “The savage women have more love for their little ones, because no others than they nurse them, something common in all of America.”<sup>1</sup> To him, savage women perfectly exemplified “the law which Nature has grafted in the hearts of all animals...to care for [their offspring].” This law, he claimed, regulated maternal feeling in all except “debauched women.” By contrast, he argues that French women preferred to use “their breasts as lewd attractions” and cruelly sent “their children to vicious wet nurses,” sacrificing the natural maternal office for the sake of convenience and pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

Similar observations in travel narratives throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mirrored Lescarbot’s critique of French wet-nursing, and were applied to native women in a variety of cultural and colonial contexts. Christian LeClerq, who was attached to another royal expedition to Québec, echoed Lescarbot’s distaste for the European practice of wet-nursing in his 1691 account. He describes the native women of the St. Lawrence River region as the very model of motherhood. Held up against the corrupted women of Old France, “Our poor savage women have so much affection for their children,” as evidenced by the fact that, “they do not in the least value the wet nurse over the mother.” LeClerq claimed a superior motherly virtue for the women of New France that compared starkly with an image of cruel rejection on the part of the mothers of Old Europe, who were so quick to farm out their infants to wet nurses for the first years of life. He claimed, “One cannot express the tenderness and friendship that [they]

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Lescarbot. *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* (Paris: Jean Millot, 1612), 657-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

have for their children,” a tenderness he locates in the fact that indigenous women typically nursed their own infants.<sup>3</sup>

The moralistic critiques contained in these two descriptions of New France are perhaps best understood as a part of a contemporary philosophical discourse on maternal duty in early modern France that also centered on the breast. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, intersecting philosophical, religious, and medical discourses combined to produce a new and particularly narrow domestic role for women that attached great cultural significance to maternal breastfeeding as the ideal expression of prescriptive maternity. Where they are elsewhere relatively objective, if sometimes puzzled, in describing native customs in New France, French writers consistently pointed to the tendency of Native American women to nurse their own children as evidence of a superior sense of maternal duty. This was a direct commentary on a contemporary discussion, ongoing in France, that also centered on the issue of maternal breastfeeding. French noblewomen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more often than not followed the established custom of hiring their children out to wet nurses during the first months of life, a fact for which they were harshly condemned in a variety of vernacular publications. Colonial writers wrote within an emerging strain of humanist and prescriptivist publications that increasingly condemned the fashion of wet-nursing, refashioning the maternal breast as the central expression of maternal love. Despite their presence in French colonial America, writers in this vein are perhaps best understood as a part of a literate, elite tradition in early modern France, rather than exclusively as objective observers of native life.

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<sup>3</sup> “*Nos pauvres Sauvages ont tant de tendresse pour leurs enfans, qu’elles n’estiment pas moins la qualité de nourrice, que de mere ... On ne peut exprimer la tendresse et l’amitié qu’ils ont pour leurs enfans.*” Chestien LeClercq, *Nouvelle relation de la Gaspésie* (Paris: A. Auroy, 1691), 49-51.

The notion that European women did not love their children as much as the native women of New France (whose attachment to their children “put Christian women to shame”), persisted throughout the French colonial projects of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was applied uniformly to a great diversity of North and South American cultures.<sup>4</sup> Marc Lescarbot, though perhaps the most elaborate author in the *moeurs* genre, merely expanded on the same exotic romanticization of native maternity that appeared in the writings of other travel writers. Along with other minor authors, this thesis will primarily examine the writings of Claude d’Abbeville and his Protestant predecessors in Brazil, Charles de Rochefort and Jean-Baptiste du Tertre in the Antilles, and Marc Lescarbot, Chrestien LeClerq, and Pierre Charlevoix in Canada. Though employed in various capacities throughout the French New World of the seventeenth century, all of these authors made similar, moralistic observations on native motherhood. All of these French colonial administrators and missionaries held up indigenous women as viable models of motherhood for Christian, European women in their writings.

Why did French writers feel inclined to reflect on the deficiencies of wet-nursing French mothers in their descriptions of Native American mothers? Scathing tirades against immoral French women seem oddly out of place in works purportedly devoted to an ethnographic description of the customs and practices of Native American peoples. The fact that such a seemingly innocuous—and distinctly European—practice as wet-nursing could so frequently find its way into narratives of travels, let alone be made the subject of intense moralization, raises a number of questions about the particular assumptions that led authors to reflect on their own country through the lens of native motherhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Lescarbot, 659.

This stands in stark contrast to the well-known tendency in the European colonial canon to dismiss native women as sexually immoderate and thus, savage.<sup>5</sup> In fact, indigenous women were consistently portrayed in early travel narratives as sexually insatiable, polygamous, and even monstrous, from the initial Spanish explorations of the New World.<sup>6</sup> The French canon was certainly not immune to such characterizations. After all, even while Lescarbot's account diverges from this dynamic on the point of native motherhood, he remains only ambiguously laudatory of native life in general.<sup>7</sup> Still, the idealization of native maternity found in many early French colonial sources contributes to a paradoxical image of New World womanhood. On the one hand, native women are portrayed as licentious and sexually threatening *sauvages* in need of Christian guidance. At the same time, they are held up as models of motherhood and obedience, to be envied by French women.

Historians have already commented extensively on how the exotic female body was often used to delimit the boundaries of difference, justify the aims of colonial projects, and uphold Eurocentrism, serving as “the site of the strategic symbolic oscillation between self and Other.”<sup>8</sup> As has been frequently observed by historians of colonization, Renaissance travel narratives often used women’s bodies and sexual behaviors as a marker of irreconcilable alterity. Historians of gender and empire Sally Kitch and Richard Trexler go so far as to argue that gender, rather than racial, difference

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<sup>5</sup> See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Sally L. Kitch, *The Specter of Sex: Gendered Foundations of Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>7</sup> His account expresses a certain horror at naked and “hideously pierced” native women, and he likens marriage between European men and “infidel” women to a coupling between animals of two different species. Lescarbot, 177, 188.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 143; Pierre Ragon, *Les Amours Indiennes: Ou L’Imaginaire du Conquistadore* (Paris: A. Colin, 1992), 42.

served as the primary marker of cultural distance in the period of early colonization.<sup>9</sup> According to this theory, the construction of an unfamiliar or even monstrous female otherness was a “useful but multivalent ideological abstraction” used to uphold a presumed European superiority.<sup>10</sup> However, representations of exotic gender were not used exclusively to promote the goals of colonial enterprise, nor did writers produce such representations in isolation from a broader European literary context.

As this thesis will demonstrate, the focus on gendered otherness, expressed in the menacing corporality of native women, accounts only for representations of glaring difference. A focus on difference ignores instances in which colonizers were willing to modify otherwise rigid hierarchies of difference and the particular cultural reasons that led them to do so. By focusing on descriptions of native women as savage or otherwise inferior, scholarship has overlooked an equally exaggerated vision of the benign and the maternal in early modern representations of Native Americans. On the subject of native motherhood, the typically rigid dichotomies of difference are muddled, and even reversed. These writings imply that French women and French aristocratic society broadly will aspire to the “purer” form of maternal love presented. As much attention as recent historians have given to the power relations that underlay the process of colonization and representation of cultural others, they have neglected to address the range of cultural anxieties that contributed to this paradoxical vision of native womanhood. At the same time, by marginalizing travel literature and failing to contextualize it within the broader context of French humanism, historians of early

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<sup>9</sup> Kitch, 31; Richard Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gender Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Holly Hurlburt, “Columbus’s Sister: Female Agency and Women’s Bodies in Early Modern Mediterranean and Atlantic Empires,” *Attending to Early Modern Women: Conflict and Concord*, ed. Karen Nelson (Lanham, MD: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 84.



modern France have failed to account for the significance of this particular form of representation in contemporary discussions of gender and family life.

Representations of native life are best understood as a part of a broader philosophical discourse ongoing in France, because they paint a much more complicated story of the early modern world than the reality of Native American customs. By failing to fully take into account the subjective nature of these descriptions, historians of Native American life have interpreted these sources in a problematic way, as many are cited as evidence of the reality of native childrearing practices.<sup>11</sup> As aptly pointed out by Rebecca Brienen in her analysis of visual representations of exotic femininity, “the decision to represent [breastfeeding] as a traditional activity of indigenous women may say more about contemporary debates regarding the proper maternal duties of European women than actual social practices outside of Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Colonizers sought in examinations of “native otherness” not just to establish difference, but to validate their own conceptions of proper gendered behavior.<sup>13</sup> In early modern English travel narratives, English women are customarily juxtaposed against “the imagined (m)Other” in a discourse that “renders the ‘savage’ mother both like them and different from them,” civilized in their manners, but savage in motherhood.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Alice Mann uses Lescarbot’s testimony as evidence specifically of Iroquoian child-parent relations, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Land Press, 2000), 271-2. Feminist scholarship, beginning with Eleanor Burke Leacock’s egalitarian thesis, has also stressed the way in which European colonization disrupted societies that may have afforded native women greater political and sexual autonomy based on European travel narratives. Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Parker Brienen, *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, “‘Savage’ Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991): 130.

French writers were equally willing to suspend an otherwise condemnatory image of native women when confronted with the seemingly obscure issue of maternal breastfeeding because it conveniently met the needs of contemporary ethical and philosophical discussions on maternal duty. Digressive moralizations on native motherhood held a significance that went beyond merely describing exotic strangeness as it was actually experienced by French colonial writers. To early French writers, the tenderness of “savage” mothers served a dual purpose, both reinforcing a contemporary discourse on proper maternal behavior, and providing a convenient foil to the artificialities of civilization.

Colonial scholarship has increasingly turned its attention towards interaction as a subjective process profoundly shaped by the context of European thought and societal norms.<sup>15</sup> Rather than attempting to draw conclusions about the process of exploitation and disruption of Native American society and gender norms, historians generally acknowledge that early modern travel narratives and cosmographies can hardly serve as accurate depictions of native life, especially on questions of gender. European men almost exclusively authored these works, and their perspective was deeply informed by a number of prevailing cultural and intellectual currents maintained simultaneously in France. Though this does pose a limitation on the reliability of such narratives, their perspective does provide invaluable information about the cultural attitudes with which Europeans approached questions of unfamiliar gender norms.

Lescarbot, de Rochefort, and most other writers who reported on the early French colonial enterprise in America are best understood as humanists, and only secondarily as

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<sup>15</sup> Laura Fishman, “Crossing Gender Boundaries: Tupi and European Women in the Eyes of Claude d’Abbeville.” *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): 85.

explorers and colonialists. As a result, it is safe to venture that travelers and missionaries constructed depictions of native maternity around a very flexible imagining of what they actually encountered. Contemporary conceptions of gender unavoidably shaped the way in which European observers described—or rather, imagined—a pure native maternity. For one, though many writers on New France, including Lescarbot, drew from their personal experiences and observations of native peoples, most borrowed extensively and carelessly from one another, including material that was ostensibly fabricated.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, this generalization was applied to an immense diversity of native peoples throughout two entire continents.<sup>17</sup> Anthropological impulse was of secondary interest to writers who seemed intent upon describing a universal maternal ideal in New France. Charles de Rochefort, in a sweeping generalization, described maternal breastfeeding as a practice common to women of the Caribbean, as well as “Peruvian and Canadian women, and almost all the other Indian women of the Occident.”<sup>18</sup> In other compilations of travels, the same generalizations were very frequently made, flattening observations made on a great diversity of cultures to fit this vision of native motherhood. What’s more, such quasi-devotional depictions of motherhood are all but absent from literature detailing the customs of the Near East, with which France had much more sustained contact throughout the period. In this way, compilers of travelers often remarked upon maternal breastfeeding as a distinctive and unifying characteristic of an exotic West. Still,

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<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps pertinent to note that Lescarbot’s latter work, concerning the *moeurs* of the Native Americans, was not issued in subsequent editions until 1612. Though the work drew on his personal experiences of life in Acadia and the first-hand accounts of other explorers like Jean de Léry and Villegagnon, the latter part seems to have been largely fabricated. See Brian Brazeau, *Writing a New France, 1604-1632: Empire and Early Modern French Identity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Cornelius J. Jaenen, “Native American Views of French Culture in the Seventeenth Century,” in Anthony Pagden, ed., *Facing Each Other: The World's Perception of Europe and Europe's Perception of the World, Part 2* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 247.

<sup>18</sup> De Rochefort, 554.

while hardly useful in mapping the anthropology of gender in early America, these depictions are immensely important for understanding an evolving ideology of gender in early modern France.

For the purposes of this study, the paradoxical inversion of the traditional hierarchy of colonizer and colonized—and the centrality of the maternal breast in that inversion—can thus be best understood within the context of early modern France itself. The uniqueness of this discourse of benign native maternity stems from contemporary anxieties about reproduction and gender in early modern France. French colonial administrators and missionaries thus approached native maternity from a perspective deeply informed by an evolving literary preoccupation with maternal duty, which moralized feminine forms of vice as symptomatic of the general moral degeneracy of civilized society. Far from a culturally sensitive attempt to understand native difference, Lescarbot and his colonial compatriots used an idealized and geographically generalized imagining of native life as a way to address particular French social anxieties, and to reinforce a prevailing ideology of gender that emphasized maternal affection and made breastfeeding of central importance in reproduction.

This interpretation better accounts for the subjective nature in which writers described their encounters, real or imagined, in New France. Still, the question remains: why was New France used as the appropriate place to discuss proper maternal duty? In order to answer this question, this study will first look more closely at how a unique French conception of savage life facilitated its use as a literary device by which to explore proper maternal duty. Next under examination will be the particular assumptions and anxieties about gender that informed early moderns who made the voyage “over

there.” Of particular interest will be parallels between their writings and a contemporary medico-philosophical discourse on maternal duty and reproduction that specifically condemned the practice of wet-nursing.

## CHAPTER 2

### MÈRES ENTIÈRES, NOURRICES MERCENAIRES: MATERNAL DUTY IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE

The fact that Native American mothers almost always nursed their own infants was a point of particular fascination for European travel writers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, almost as entrancing as critical observations on their nudity and sexual mores. A diversity of travel narratives, second-hand commentaries, and compilations intended for a popular audience highlighted the tenderness of Native American mothers. Marc Lescarbot was so struck that indigenous mothers nursed their own children that he devoted an entire chapter of his section on his *moeurs* section to the subject to “On the Feeding of Children.” Among French *cosmographes* from these two centuries, virtually no serious *moeurs* chapter fails to remark on this phenomenon.

Attesting to the interest maternal breastfeeding in New France inspired, Charles de Rochefort makes special mention of the fact that Caribbean women, as well as “almost all Indians of the West,” and in the East Indies nursed their children. He emphasized the point that mother and nurse, culturally distinct terms in French family life, were one and the same in these cultures.<sup>19</sup> This distinction as it existed in seventeenth-century France that informed a seemingly undue fascination with maternal breastfeeding in New France.

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<sup>19</sup> Rochefort, 554; Gerry Hill, et al., “The Medical and Demographic Importance of Wet-Nursing,” *Canadian Society for the History of Medicine* 4 (1987): 183-92.

French commentators and their readers would have perceived this as being a particularly strange practice, given the popularity of wet-nursing in France of the time.

When these texts are understood as humanist productions deeply informed by literate, elite currents that made the nursing breast central to motherhood, these depictions may be treated as a useful means by which to discuss contemporary anxieties about gender, reproduction, and proper maternal duty. A number of concerns in early modern France converged to make maternal breastfeeding a subject of central importance in literate circles. Drawing on classical sources that condemned wet-nursing and religious sources that affirmed the maternal breast's long-standing symbolic role in affective piety, new quasi-scientific and humanistic discourses combined to reinforce a new maternal ideal: that of the *mère entière*.

While recent European historians have given much attention to the “cultural history of the breast,” and its idealistic reconfiguration in the writings of moralists and physicians, studies by Yvonne Knibiehler and others on maternal love and nursing are exclusively limited to the context of European family life. They exclude any examination of early colonial sources, and the exportation of maternal idealism to New France.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, most studies have largely focused on the eighteenth century, where historians have typically located the initial recognition and celebration of the maternal and the domestic as the appropriate social role of women. Historian of early modern birth and childhood Marie-France Morel claims that the perception of wet-nursing in France, generally accepted during the eighteenth-century, underwent a decided change in the iconography that surrounded it, as criticism of “mercenary nurses” and maternal

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Richter, “Wet-Nursing, Onanism, and the Breast in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7(1996): 1; Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Marand-Fouquet, *Histoire des mères du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris, Montalba, 1981).

indifference came into currency in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> These arguments found their full expression in the sentimental tradition inspired by Rousseau's *Émile* and the ensuing fashionability of maternal domesticity that reached its peak in the 1780s in France.

The roots of these criticisms actually emerge in sixteenth and seventeenth-century moral, medical, and prescriptive literature and were only later united to the iconic responsibility of the breast in republican idealism. Phillippe Ariès first ascribed “The invention of childhood,” as a distinct and particularly impressionable period of life to pre-Enlightenment Europe.<sup>22</sup> This was preceded by what may be called “the invention of motherhood,” through the sixteenth-century reorganization of family life broadly. The subject of maternal breastfeeding [*l'allaitement maternel*] especially was connected to an ongoing shift in the perception of motherhood. Literate elites dedicated an unprecedented amount of attention to childcare and the obligations of motherhood in printed culture during the sixteenth century. Christian theology had devoted greater attention to labor and childbearing as central to the maternal office since women, of course, were “saved through childbearing.”<sup>23</sup> Newly drawn “links between women, motherhood, the family and natural morality may help to explain the emphasis on the breast” in early modern medical and moral literature.<sup>24</sup> Prescriptive and medical writers drew upon already existing classical and religious symbolism to make breastfeeding of central importance to motherhood and to the process of reproduction itself. The preoccupation with nursing, rather than childbearing, as the central expression of the maternal revealed a new concern

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<sup>21</sup> Marie-France Morel, “Images de nourrices dans la France des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles,” *Paedagogica Historica* 46 (2010) 6: 803.

<sup>22</sup> See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York, 1962). Ruth Perry, “Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2 (1991): 205.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Tim. 2:15. Revised Standard Version.

<sup>24</sup> Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 49.



with tenderness and love in mother-child relations that further restricted the vocation of women to mothering.

The parallels that exist between this discourse and glorified representations of native maternity in New France are impossible to ignore. The benign discourse about native maternity exports contemporary anxieties about reproduction and gender in early modern France, adding an exoticized model to moralistic rhetoric. Many *moeurs* writers even lifted text directly from contemporary critics of wet-nursing in France. French colonial administrators and missionaries thus approached native maternity from a perspective deeply informed by an evolving literary and philosophical preoccupation with maternal duty and love, which moralized feminine forms of vice as symptomatic of the general moral degeneracy of civilized society.

### **The Reality of Wet-Nursing in Early Modern France**

To begin with, it is important to distinguish between the social reality of wet-nursing in early modern France, and the ideal presented in humanist and moralistic texts. To the modern reader, wet-nursing is an antiquated and uncommon practice, and the preoccupation of pre-modern literate culture on wet-nursing as a moral issue seems out of place. However, “hiring out” infants to wet nurses was a common social practice, with “a uniquely high incidence” in France since the Middle Ages.<sup>25</sup> The practice of wet-nursing came from decidedly aristocratic origins. According to Londa Schiebinger, medieval European noblewomen first adopted wet-nursing in the interest of fashion, in order to attain a renewed classical aesthetic ideal of the small, firm breast, such as that praised in

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<sup>25</sup> George D. Sussman, “The End of the Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1874-1914,” in *Family and Sexuality in French History*, ed. Robert Wheaton and Tamara Hareven (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 226.

Clément Marot's 1535 poem "On the Beautiful Breast" [*"Du beau tetin"*].<sup>26</sup> Under this system, aristocratic or bourgeois children were typically sent to neighboring villages or into the countryside [*à la campagne*] in popular parlance, rather than having the nurse stay within the household.

This was not an exclusively aristocratic phenomenon and its motivations were certainly not limited to the demands of fashion. By the early modern period, wet-nursing in France was no longer a marker of fashion, but an established custom among all but the poorest families. As several historians have recently argued, nearly all infants in seventeenth-century France, even those of low and middling social standing, were sent out to wet nurses for the first months of life.<sup>27</sup> Antoine Furetière's 1690 dictionary reveals something of how this continual circulation of infants worked even among village wet nurses themselves, who would "give their own infants to a nurse, in order to take on bourgeois children."<sup>28</sup> Beginning in the seventeenth century, parishes even offered wet-nursing as a form of poor relief to mothers overburdened by children.<sup>29</sup> Certainly by the eighteenth century, France was in the "heyday of wet-nursing."<sup>30</sup> The only exact statistics documenting the prevalence of wet-nursing in France do not appear until 1780. Still, the lieutenant general of police reported that by that time over ninety percent of all infants in

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<sup>26</sup> Londa Schiebinger, "Why Mammals Are Called Mammals: Gender Politics in Eighteenth-Century Natural History," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 401; Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 199; Clément Marot, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Y. Giraud (Paris, 1973), 402.

<sup>27</sup> David Hunt, *Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 119.

<sup>28</sup> Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel* vol. 2 (Paris, 1690), 490.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Brace, "Rousseau, Maternity, and the Politics of Emptiness" *Polity* 39 (2007): 362.

<sup>30</sup> Sussman, *Selling Mother's Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1715-1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 13.

Paris were nursed by a woman other than their biological mother.<sup>31</sup> The popularity of “extramural” or wet-nursing “à la campagne” as an essential part of child-rearing began to dissipate only in the nineteenth century, despite its denunciation by Rousseau and others before the Revolution.<sup>32</sup> Thus, wet-nursing in the early modern period was hardly an elite phenomenon.

### **Literate Concerns with *l’Allaitement Maternel*: Classical Influences**

Moralists nonetheless associated wet-nursing with the aristocracy and the heated rhetoric that surrounded it was very often directed toward elite, literate women and their excesses. By the sixteenth century, some of the first cohesive arguments in favor of *l’allaitement maternel* were advanced. Most stressed the subject as symptomatic of elite decadence and artifice rather than focusing on strictly medical objections.<sup>33</sup> During this time, a veritable army of religious leaders and reformers, philosophers, and moralists revived a set of long-standing moral arguments against the practice of wet-nursing. These works were permeated with anxieties about maternal duty that intersected with those contained in condemnatory accounts that juxtaposed French mothers against a superior “savage” mother-type. It would be difficult to overlook the similarities that exist between the moralizing rhetoric that surrounded native femininity and the ongoing debate over breastfeeding as an appropriate maternal duty. In this way, exotic maternity functioned as a moral counterpoint within a debate that was in fact centered in France.

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<sup>31</sup> “On peut évaluer à vingt, vingt & un mille la quantité d’enfans qui naissent à Paris. Un trentième au plus suce le lait maternel: un pareil nombre est allaité dans la maison des peres & meres.” Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir, *Détail sur quelques établissemens de la ville de Paris* (Paris, 1780), 63.

<sup>32</sup> Sussman, “The End of the Wet-Nursing Business,” 224.

<sup>33</sup> Denise Lemieux, *Les Petits Innocents: L’Enfance en Nouvelle-France* (Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1985), 118.



**Figure 1: “*Nourrice ordinaire de France* [Typical French nurse].”** Engraving from Václav Hollav, *Livre curieux contenant la naïfve representation des habits des femmes des diverses parties du monde* (Paris: Moncornet, 1643), 4. Though vehemently criticized in literate circles of the time, wet-nursing was a recognized element of the social landscape throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Wet nurses commonly numbered among representations of women in illustrations like this one, which is preceded by the “Parisian woman” and the “Village woman.”

Beginning in the early sixteenth century, a new body of popular, printed literature offered moral, medical, and spiritual advice to the literate lay populace, including advice on the proper care of children. This corpus made reproduction and proper female behavior an area of literate concern on the part of male theologians, social commentators, and physicians. By the seventeenth century, even explorers and compilers of travel narratives saw in the strangeness of native maternal norms an ideal opportunity to join in this moralizing discourse of maternity.

Humanists were deeply influenced by a Roman literate tradition that incited mothers to nurse their own infants. Classical authors attached a great deal of moral

weight to maternal breastfeeding. Quintilian, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Marcus Aurelius, especially, were suspicious of the perceived social threat posed by lower-class nurses in Roman times and lauded the beneficial effects of maternal influence.<sup>34</sup> The philosopher Favorinus vehemently denounced aristocratic women for their vanity and laziness. Beyond mere class anxiety, Roman authors evinced a unique concern for the ability of breast milk to transmit moral properties. Drawing a physiological connection between the milk and virtue, Favorinus suggested that those most commonly employed as wet nurses, foreign slave women, might transmit their moral deficiencies to the child.<sup>35</sup> This idea was also grounded in the writings of Vergil, Plato, Theophrastus, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Pliny, and a multitude of other classical sources.<sup>36</sup> Others, including Quintilian and Tacitus, regurgitated this argument against the corruptive influence of the milk of immoral women. The cases of Caligula and Tiberius, emperors of Rome, were often presented as case examples of this phenomenon, their personality flaws originating from the corrupted milk of a nurse, from which they sucked a “bad nature.”<sup>37</sup>

Not only was the moral development of the child connected to the physiological influence of the maternal milk. These Roman authors also expressed concern about the sanctity of the maternal bond. The affective benefits of maternal breastfeeding were continually highlighted in moralistic passages. Tacitus nostalgically bemoaned how “in the good old days, every child born to a respectable mother was brought up not in the

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<sup>34</sup> McNeel, 72; Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Harkin, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53-4.

<sup>35</sup> Beryl Rawson, *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 214.

<sup>36</sup> Jacqueline T. Miller, “Mother Tongues: Language and Lactation in Early Modern Literature” *English Literary Renaissance* 27(1997): 188.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Charles Fremon, *La vie, la mort et les miracles de Sainte Estienne, confesseur, fondateur de l'ordre de Grand-Mont, dit vulgairement des bons homes* (Dijon, 1647), 9.

chamber of a bought nurse, but at his mother's knee." He implied that this change had disrupted the mutual affection between aristocratic children and their mothers.<sup>38</sup>

The renewed interest in the classical past following the French Renaissance re-introduced these arguments to literate circles. Moralists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mirrored the arguments of classical authors in praise of maternal nursing, highlighting the physiological, as well as psychological benefits that it supposedly conferred on the child. Emphasizing the sentimental importance of the milk in the formation of the maternal bond, the French translation of Plutarch's *Oeuvres Morales* by d'Aymot renders these anxieties particularly salient. Nursing not only ensured the moral wholeness of the child, but inspired the "*charité, amour et dilection*" owed by mothers to their children.<sup>39</sup> Similar arguments proved particularly salient throughout the literate productions of early modern France. Much like Tacitus and other classical authors, wet-nursing was frequently cited as a sign of "the miseries of humankind...in connection with the corruption of man" and the degeneration of French aristocratic society as a whole.<sup>40</sup>

### **Unnatural Motherhood**

The corrupting influence of non-maternal milk was further reinforced by a medieval devotional tradition that attached sacred importance to lactation and nursing. Given the power of the milk to impress certain moral qualities onto infants, "unnatural" motherhood could be especially dangerous in the religious climate of early modern France and Europe generally. At the same time, religion provided an ideal model that further normalized nursing as an expression of maternal love. The focus of medieval and early modern affective piety on the nursing breast of the Virgin, or Madonna Lactans, as

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<sup>38</sup> Tacitus, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Plutarch, *Les Oeuvres Morales*, trans. Jacques d'Aymot (Paris, 1587), 101.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Boaistuau, *Le Théâtre du monde des misères humaines* (Paris, 1559), 26.

the premier exemplar of maternal piety in late medieval and Renaissance religious iconography is undeniable. From the twelfth century onward, the increasing importance given to the Virgin Mary, devotion to female saints, and a preference for analogies “taken from friendship, marriage, and family” greatly influenced religious life.<sup>41</sup> The somber fate afforded women in Christian theology, condemned to “bring forth children in pain,” describes the maternal office in terms of suffering and sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> However, the nursing breast, rather than the pangs of labor, was the most common expression of the maternal and tender nature of Christ in late medieval and early modern affective spirituality. Analogies that figured Christ or particular religious authorities as a nursing mother were not uncommon, further reinforcing the connection between the nursing breast and the transmission of piety and virtue.

Drawing on this tradition, early French humanists described maternal nursing as an act intimately associated with virtue and morality. In contrast, writers frequently cast wet-nursing as a practice that contradicted nature itself. A preoccupation with nature and maternal analogy in nature, informed the concerns of French Renaissance moralists, and evinced a new concern with delimiting the “natural” function of the breast and motherhood more broadly. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, theologians and cultural commentators looked to nature as the supreme source of prescriptive maternity. Early on, Italian humanist Francesco Barbaro in his *De re uxoria* (1415) claimed that nursing was an essential and natural expression of the maternal bond that even the “terrible she-bear” did not neglect, and ensured that her young would care

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<sup>41</sup> Bynum, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Gen. 3:16. Revised Standard Version.

for her in old age.<sup>43</sup> Increasingly common throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, titles and chapter headings from moralistic works, such as “On the love and natural charity of mothers and fathers for their children,” emphasized natural duty and social obligation between parents and children.<sup>44</sup> Sentimental analogy drawn from nature, where “animals lactate for love of their offspring,” connected the act of nursing with the natural obligations of maternal duty.<sup>45</sup> In this way, nature proved a useful source of moralizing comparison, the implication being that mothers who did not nurse their children showed less care for their young than even wild animals.

This was an argument current even in the very early sixteenth century. Drawing upon a humanist conception of nature and virtue, writers and poets cast wet-nursing as an act of “unnatural motherhood,” likening it to “a kind of exposure” that “owls, lions, and vipers” would deign to inflict on their young.<sup>46</sup> Theologian Jean Talpin, like many others, exploited examples from nature to illustrate the inhumanity of mothers who left their child in the clutches of a wet nurse: “She would be outdone by nature for her inhumanity and cruel disdain, by the most cruel beasts, like tigers, lions, leopards, and wolves, who so tenderly nourish their little ones, so dearly warm them, care for them and nourish them.” By extension, he argues, “such mothers who abandon their children [to a wet nurse] show that they do not truly love them and are unnatural.”<sup>47</sup> The poet d’André

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<sup>43</sup> Francesco Barbaro, “On Wifely Duties,” in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. and trans. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 222.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, 101.

<sup>45</sup> “*Tempore quae gignit foetus, ac lactat eodem Bestia prolis amans...*” Barthélemy Aneau makes this odd point in discussing the reproductive abilities of rabbits in his book of emblems and exempla, *Picta poesis* (Lyons, 1552), 99.

<sup>46</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Colloquies*, trans. and ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 595-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



Mage de Fiefmelin drew a particularly odd allusion to the attentions of fish to their swarming broods, in pointing out the deficiencies of contemporary mothers.

This human body, emerging from the womb,  
Enters the cradle to be treated even worse,  
Though usually he would be nursed,  
Sucking the milk of his *mère-nourrice*.  
Alas! Too often forgetting her office,  
His own mother, after giving birth,  
Gives him to another, to be nursed  
By a stranger given to all vice.  
Who has seen the same in any of the animals,  
Although they are numberless and brutish?  
Mother, such a cruel mother [*marastre*], learn thus to do better,  
See the many fish, whose loving breast,  
Receives the swarm of its little ones;  
For them, they feel a hundred times the travail of Mother.<sup>48</sup>

Fiefmelin's striking choice of a non-mammal as a point of contrast further underlines the concept of nursing as the natural duty of motherhood. Compared to the neglect of the *marastre*'s relatively small brood, even the attentions of the lowly (and ironically non-lactating) fish to its swarming offspring are preferable. Humanist concern with analogy from nature bolstered classical arguments about the affective and sentimental importance of nursing to mothering. Such illustrations drew inflexible distinctions between "good" and "bad" mothering, guised in the language of "natural" and "unnatural."

As a result, the dualistic vision of "good" and "bad" mothering often centered on the moral failure of mothers who did not nurse their own children, and obscured the social realities that surrounded this choice. "Unnatural mothers" who engaged the services of a wet nurse were invariably described as acting in the name of convenience, or worse, their own immoral pleasure. Mothers were also attacked for their perceived

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<sup>48</sup> "Ce corps humain, sortant de la matrice, / Entre au berceau pour estre pis traicté, Bien qu'autrement il soit alimenté, / succant le lait de sa mere-nourrice, / Las! Trop souvent oubliant son office / Sa propre mere, en l'ayant enfanté, / Le donne à d'autre afin d'estre allaité / D'une estrangere adonnée à tout vice. / Qui void le mesme en un des animaux / bien que de sans il ait normbre & brutaux? / Mere, ains Marastre, appren donc à mieux faire. / Voy maint poisson, don't le sein amoureux / Recoit l'essain de ses petits pour eux, / Pour eux cent fois cent fois les travaux de Mere." D'André Mage de Fiefmelin. *L'Image d'un mage ou le spiritual*, vol. 2 (Poitiers, 1601), 106-7.

vanity and penchant for luxury. Pierre Boaistuau viciously criticized those women who sent their children “to the sad villages to have them nursed by strange and unknown women” for their negligence and their lack of love. He wrote for instance, that they even deemed “it less shameful to hold their little lap dogs in their arms than the fruit that they begot.”<sup>49</sup> Authors such as Pierre Boaistuau highlighted the negligence and supposed lack of love on the part of mothers. Pierre Dionis, blending medical advice with moral rhetoric exhorted mothers “to give suck to their own children,” adding sarcastically, “although it is not expected that many will follow it, because they love their ease too much, and their children too little.”<sup>50</sup> Once again, despite the widespread popularity of wet nursing during this period, literate, moralistic publications invariably associated the “neglect” of mothers with leisure, luxury, and a degenerate aristocratic culture.

The specter of unnatural motherhood extended to a more extreme form of sentimentalism. Humanist Scévole de Sainte-Marthe devoted a long poem, translated as *La Manière de nourrir les enfants à la mammelle* (1584), to the subject. In an extended passage, he threatens his female readers with the unthinkable loss of maternal affection that they faced as a result of their “gross injustice.” He paints the potential destabilizing effect of this loss in grossly sentimental terms by demanding, “Who will carry that unfortunate child in their arms, and on whose breast will he rest on?” To him, their

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<sup>49</sup> “*Mais combien y a il aujourdhuy de meres (ou pour en parler à la verité cruelles marastres) auxquelles il suffist d’avoir tiré leurs enfans hors de leurs entrailles & mis sur la terre, & au lieu de les nourrir, les envoyent aux tristes villages pour les faire nourrir par femmes estrangeres & incogneues... & seroient moins honteuses de tenir de petits chiens camus entre leurs bras, que tenir le fruict qu’elles ont engendré.*” Boaistuau, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Dionis, *A General Treatise on Midwifery*, trans. (London: A. Bell, 1719). Quoted in Rebecca Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield), 45.

surrender of affection is “crueler than the savage beasts.”<sup>51</sup> Any woman who would forgo her natural duty, giving up her child to the caresses of a wet nurse, was not only herself unloving, but implicitly also risked the loss of her own child’s love. Such sentimental exhortations hint at the moral consequences of denying one’s natural duty.

Literary depictions of the early childhood of Christ were equally popular both as devotional material for literate worshippers and rhetorical fuel for moralists on *l’allaitement maternel*. Even more popular sources, not necessarily infected with the same venom of pseudo-philosophical discussions on maternal nursing, contained moralizing overtones. One popular song containing an expressive monologue by “*La Vierge*” herself, recounts the early childhood of Jesus as an example to contemporary mothers:

At a more tender age,  
He drank from none but my breast...  
That was his sole nourishment,  
And the appropriate nourishment  
Of the son of the King of the firmament.<sup>52</sup>

Other devotional works located themselves in the same rhetorical tradition of moralists who drew their exhortations to nurse from the ancient examples of Caligula and Tiberius. However, where moralists chose to draw religious parallels, they often did so with a more sentimental consciousness, conceding in the words of Évelyne Berriot-

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<sup>51</sup> “*Qui est-ce qui portera entre ses bras ce malheureux enfant, et sur la poitrine de qui se reposera-t-il? Qui est-ce qui aura le plaisir d’entendre ses premiers ris, & le doux murmure des premières paroles qu’il prononcera d’une langue bégayante?*” Scévole de Sainte-Marthe, *Paedotrophiae ou la manière de nourrir les enfans a la mammelle*, trans. Abel de Sainte Marthe (Paris, 1698), 12. Originally published 1584.

<sup>52</sup> “*Pendant l’age plus enfantin, / Il n’a succé que mon tetin, / C’estoit là le seul aliment / Et la nourriture ordinaire / Du fils du Roy du firmament.*” Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore, *Un corps, un destin: La Femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance* (Paris: Honore Champion, 1993), 188.

Salvadore that “perhaps anathema was not the best weapon of instruction.”<sup>53</sup> Apart from the grim social and biological arguments that populated the writings of moralists and medical writers, the threat of imperfect motherhood is followed by a more positive image of the “*lien affectif*” in explicitly religious imagery. Between mother and child, Madonna and Christ, maternal love as well as maternal duty is presumably reinforced by the act of nursing.

As his mother I took the care  
To treat his needs,  
With love and diligence[...]  
When I think of his look,  
His smiles and precious kisses,  
With which he cherished me at that age,  
My happiness is doubled,  
And I am still completely delighted  
By those little moments.<sup>54</sup>

Here, not only is nursing a divine obligation, but a pleasure for mothers as well. In a religious climate dominated by images of divine masculinity and authority, nursing was commonly presented as an experience that mothers might share in common even with the most sacred.

The same concern with the maternal milk in molding infant piety carries through to the writings of French Huguenots as well, who continued to embrace the symbology of lactation in a variety of contexts. The transmissive nature of the milk could threaten not only the morality, but the religious development of the child. Parents were reminded of their obligation to instill piety and virtue in their children from an early age. For this

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<sup>53</sup> “*Mais les médecins en bons pédagogues de la famille ont conscience, quant à eux, que l’anathème n’est peut-être pas la meilleure arme d’édification. Pour mieux convaincre, leur argumentation sait aussi se faire séductrice...les raisons médicales, morales et sociales, esquisse un portrait charmant de la petite enfance, pour montrer aux mères que le devoir peut être un véritable plaisir.*” *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> “*Comme sa Mere l’auois soin / De le traiter à son besoin / Avec amour & diligence, / Lors que ie pense à ses regards / Aux sousris & baisers mignards / Dont en cet âge il m’a chérie / Je double mes contentements / Et suis encor toute rauie / De l’heur de ces petits moments.*” Pierre Binard, *Noels ou cantiques nouveaux* (Nicolas Oudot: Troyes, 1664), 45.

reason, the obligation to nurse took on a pedagogical significance during this time, as infant nourishment became an essential part of a child's early education.



**Figure 2: “Life Devoid of Virtue is Worse than Death.”** Caption: Nature simply concedes life to us; / But virtue teaches us to balance it well; / The first, all come to appeal to her milk, / [As for] the second, none but the good are suited for her bread. [*Nature simplement nous concède la vie: / Mais vertu nous apprend à la bien niveller; / La première à son lait chacun vient appeller, / La seconde à son pain rien que bon ne convie.*]<sup>55</sup>

The emblems of Jean-Jacques Boissard (Figure 2) reminded parents who wished to instill their child with proper Christian piety that, “Virtue cannot be acquired too early [*Trop tost ne peut la vertu s’acquérir.*]” Boissard’s image (Figure 2) and its accompanying text, roughly translated, attests to the division between two stages in education and the pedagogical significance of the mother’s milk. The first is figuratively associated with milk and the acquisition of virtue and stands in as a sort of *Maria Lactans* herself; the second virginal figure, with formal education, or “bread”. A moral foundation based upon virtue and goodness is here associated with the milk, and elevated as a

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<sup>55</sup> Boissard, 35.

necessary precondition to formal education. Comparing youth to a tender sapling, Boissard claimed that parents were obligated to, “Have the child suck virtue / from the tender breast, accustoming him to good. / The mind is pliable then, and young and ready.”<sup>56</sup> Though this served a metaphor for instilling proper behavior throughout life, it is implied that the “fragrant liquor” of the milk as a vehicle of virtue would have lasting influence over rebellious tendencies of youth and, through pious habits, even conquer an unsavory nature.<sup>57</sup> The association between milk and virtue makes sense considering the pedagogical imperative that moralistic writers placed on maternal nursing, and the long-standing association between breast milk and the transmission of virtue.

This image also mirrors the division of parental responsibility in early childhood education during the sixteenth century. Mothers were primarily responsible for children’s care and education during the first years of life. At around age eight, aristocratic boys typically began their “formal” education, the primary object of which was classical language learning. This responsibility largely rested on the father. The discourse of humanism extended this division between maternal and paternal educational roles even to vernacular and formal language learning. As Yael Manes observed, “The vernacular was associated with milk, nourishment, breast-feeding and the maternal body, while Latin was associated with discipline, order, masculinity and male authority.”<sup>58</sup>

Other images reinforced the importance of nursing in allegorical models drawn from Christian virtue. After the Council of Trent put an end to nudity in artwork in 1563,

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<sup>56</sup> “*Il faut faire succer de la tendre mammelle / A l’enfant la vertu, l’accoutumant au bien, / L’esprit lors est ployable, & jeune preste bien, / Comme fait du scion la croissance nouvelle: / Mais plustot que flechir se rompt l’arbre rebelle.*” Jean Jacques Boissard, *Emblemes nouvellement mis de latin en françois par Pierre Joly* (Metz A. Faber, 1595), 18.

<sup>57</sup> “*Qui resiste à l’effort: l’odorante liqueur / Premiere infuse au tais y laisse son odeur: / Et souvent l’habitude outre nature excelle.*” *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Yael Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities in Sixteenth-Century Italian Comedy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 72.

representations of the “*Vierge allaitante*” [the nursing Virgin] largely disappeared, to be replaced by less explicitly religious representations of nursing. The imagery surrounding it was adapted to other allegorical forms, and even Protestant circles did not abandon the religious imagery that surrounded the nursing mother. In this image (Figure 3), taken from Calvinist Georgette de Montenay’s book of emblems, a woman surrounded by children and an infant at her breast, stands in as Charity. The association between nursing as an act of Christian charity, often used interchangeably with *piété* is highlighted in multiple texts.



**Figure 3: The Allegory of Charity.** Latin text: “[Charity] suffereth long, and is kind; envieth not; vaunteth not itself, etc.” (From 1 Cor. 13:4-6). Accompanying French text: “Contemplating this woman see, / That charity is a good work. / Believe it, anyone who says I have faith without charity, / Boasts falsely of being a Christian.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Georgette de Montenay, *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes* (1571), ed. Christopher N. Smith (Menston: Scolar Press, 1973), 59.

The emphasis on charity and its connection to the maternal breast is strikingly present in literature from the New World as well. Lescarbot, LeClerq, and other authors of New France often cited maternal nursing as an expression of indigenous charity or piety. Even in the absence of “the law of all charity”, those who lived “across the ocean, without God, without law, without religion...in a pitiable ignorance,” demonstrated a remarkable degree of goodness that was especially apparent in their care for their children.<sup>60</sup> European writers pointed to the tendency of indigenous mothers to nurse their own children as a sort of “heathen virtue” that fulfilled both Catholic and Reformed religious associations between lactation and affective piety.

Combined with renewed classical and religious anxieties concerning the transmissible nature of the milk, analogy from nature further confirmed maternity as the natural vocation of women, and nursing the proper expression of motherhood. Early medical writers sought to unite these and similar classical arguments with an evolving science of reproduction, the result being a philosophical-medical discourse that gave biological credence to the role of milk in the transmission of virtue. Together, sentimental and medical arguments worked together to produce a new early modern ideal of motherhood that centered maternal love on the act of nursing.

### **“The Power to Form the Man Unformed”: The Culture and the Physiology of Transmission**

The power of the milk of a wet nurse to degrade and degenerate the character of children, especially noble children, merely through the vehicle of the milk was of paramount concern to early modern medical, moralistic, and religious writers alike. These concerns were united with a biological conception of reproduction that afforded breast

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<sup>60</sup> Lescarbot, 7.



milk a central position in the development of the child. Paralleling anxieties about unloving and unnatural mothers was the incredibly common belief that vices and a “bad nature” could be directly transmitted to infants via breast milk. This added a deeply moral dimension to the way in which nursing was perceived, and further exacerbated anxieties about the character and behavior of lower class nurses being imprinted onto the child. In early modern France, the wet nurse did not just nourish the infants in her charge, but also transmitted to them her vices, virtues, and appearance, even her diet.

By the seventeenth century, a growing body of literature devoted to the newly defined science of reproduction further added medical legitimacy to classical and religious authority. Though based on long-held biological conceptions of the body and reproduction, this new scientific discourse was unique both in the way medical authors incorporated sentimental arguments concerning the value of lactation, as well as the immense amount of attention given to the subject in the publishing world. France experienced a veritable explosion of books on reproductive and obstetrical health in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by authors like Ambroise Paré, Jacques Guillemeau, André Du Laurens, and Jean Riolan. About twenty new works on women’s and obstetrical health were published between 1530 and 1630. More were published in French than in any other language and a good portion were also later translated into English.<sup>61</sup> Much like the many travel narratives circulating from New France, these texts were originally published in the vernacular or later translated, and thus intended for a popular audience. Unlike narratives, however, many medical texts especially seem to have envisioned a largely female readership as, “ultimately, on motherhood” authors

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<sup>61</sup> Valerie Worth-Stylianou, *Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern France: Treatises by Caring Physicians and Surgeons (1581-1625)* (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013), xvi.

wished “to be heard by women since it was their habits they sought primarily to influence.”<sup>62</sup> Although earlier Italian humanists like Francisco Barbaro drew upon similar arguments about the transmissible character of the milk, the French medical tradition was unique in its attention to breastfeeding as central to both procreation and as the ideal expression of motherly care.

Despite the increasing professionalization of medicine throughout the early modern period, the influence of classical thought on medical publications shines through in extended moralistic passages. Laurent Joubert, personal physician to Catherine de’ Medici and Henry III, quoted classical sources at length in his works on reproduction. In one case, he copied a full chapter from the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius, dedicated specifically to the importance of maternal breastfeeding, as if it were intended as medical advice.<sup>63</sup> As male *accoucheurs* slowly replaced female midwives as the primary source of reproductive medical authority, early modern French doctors and medical texts refashioned, but also often re-adopted the ancient language of transmission and natural obligation, applying a new language of moral duty to mothering.

Breast milk was believed to be incredibly sensitive to “corruption” of all kinds. Medical and philosophical writers identified a great number of things that could potentially “corrupt the milk,” and thus the child, degrading the superior character conferred on him by virtue of his noble birth. In the eyes of medical writers, nurses bore the responsibility of maintaining a sort of “psycho-affective equilibrium” in order to conform to anxieties surrounding “the corruption of the milk.”<sup>64</sup> Writers were often

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<sup>62</sup>Valérie Worth-Styliano, *Les Traités d’obstétrique en langue française au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2007), 190.

<sup>63</sup> Laurent Joubert, *Erreurs populaires au fait de la médecine et régime de santé* (Paris: 1578), 177.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

forced conceded to the reality of wet-nursing as the norm of family life, and recommended careful attention in the choice of a nurse, should the mother fail to heed medical wisdom on the question. Diet and even sexual behaviors figured prominently in these discussions. Gabriel de Minut, a physician under Catherine de Medicis, advised that, should mothers insist upon hiring out their children, that they at least choose “wise, sober, and chaste” nurses, “well-regulated in their eating and drinking habits. Because certainly, most often both the good and the bad of the child depend upon its first nourishment.”<sup>65</sup> Even astonishingly high rates of infant mortality that faced infants sent *à la campagne* seemed to be of secondary concern to the risk corrupted milk posed to a child’s character.<sup>66</sup> Most especially, the literate medical establishment of the period prescribed sexual abstinence to nurses. In a 1691 chapter of *Pratique de médecine special* dedicated to childhood illnesses, d’Etmuller argued that “the milk is corrupted by intercourse and by the pregnancy of the nurse, as is evident from common experience.”<sup>67</sup> Paradoxically, some authors proposed that the sexual frustration induced by this rule would have an equally negative effect. As Joubert humorously observed in his passage on the proper choice of a wet nurse, “You see [nurses] sometimes so troubled by amorous

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<sup>65</sup> Gabriel de Minut, *De la beauté discours divers* (Lyon, 1587), 92-4.

<sup>66</sup> “A baby’s chances of survival were better if nursed by the mother, even if she was poor. In eighteenth-century France, the mortality rate for infants was around 16-18 percent; whereas between half and two-thirds of those sent out to nurse died.” Linda A. Pollock, “Parent-Child Relations,” in *The History of the European Family: Family Life in Early Modern Times (1500-1789)*, eds. by David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2001), 194. This perhaps provides some amount of support to Philippe Ariès’ controversial theory that parents in pre-modern Europe attached little affection to infants until they grew old enough to prove they could survive past childhood; childhood only being “discovered” after mortality rates began to decline, a claim that has frequently been recently questioned by the likes of David Hunt. Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy goes so far as to suggest wet-nursing in medieval and early modern Europe was risky enough to constitute a socially acceptable form of infanticide. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, “Fitness Tradeoffs in the History and Evolution of Delegated Mothering with Special Reference to Wet-Nursing, Abandonment, and Infanticide,” in *Infanticide and Parental Care*, ed. Stefano Parmigiani and Frederick S. vom Saal (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood, 1994), 10-11.

<sup>67</sup> “*Que le lait soit corrompu par le coût et par la grosseur de la nourrice, it est evident par l’expérience commune.*” D’Etmuller, *Pratique de médecine special* (Paris: 1691), quoted in Daniel Teyssiere, *Pédiatrie des lumières* (Paris : J. Vrin, 1982), 120.

passion that they lose all composure... Who doubts that the milk is from thence equally troubled and the breasts in danger of drying up?"<sup>68</sup> At all points, the medical establishment viewed the nurse with an intense suspicion that redounded on her typically low social status, especially on the issue of sex.

This discussion of "corruption" drew upon a newly revived Aristotelian conception of reproduction that afforded breast milk the power to further shape a child's development "extra-gestae."<sup>69</sup> Medical theorists thought that breast milk was converted menstrual blood, which supposedly nourished the child in the womb as well. During pregnancy, the fetus was nourished by menstrual blood, which was then diverted, "back up the mammillary veins... where it is changed into milk" after the birth of the child.<sup>70</sup> In this configuration, breast milk afforded the same necessary nourishment, and, more importantly, that same formative quality that it provided in the womb. The new science of reproduction thus afforded breast milk equal power in the development of the child even after conception and birth. In the very words of Joubert, "as the male seed has the power to create children, and provide them with a body and a spirit, the milk also has just as much property and virtue in their making."<sup>71</sup> Because breast milk was itself an essential part of reproduction and the development of the child, a wet nurse had the power to completely transform the character of her charge if she were lazy, lecherous, or given to

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<sup>68</sup> "Vous les verrez quelquefois si troublées de passion amoureuse qu'elles en perdent toute contenance, voire le manger et le dormir. Qui doute que pour lors le lait ne soit troublé de même et les mamelles en danger de tarir?" Joubert, 320.

<sup>69</sup> Miller, 189; Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, Babies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), 190.

<sup>70</sup> In explanation of this process, "If the blood is in the liver, it becomes red, but as soon as it is in the breasts it is whitened, the food becoming white chyle. Chyle becomes red blood, the blood becomes milk, the milk builds a new person." Lazare Pena, *Histoire des embellisemens, avec la méthode pour guérir les maladies du cuir* (Paris, 1616), 59. Quoted in Worth-Stylianou, 84.

<sup>71</sup> "Comme le sperme à la force de faire ressembler les enfans, & de corps & d'esprit, à leurs parens: le laict aussi a vertu & propriété d'en faire autant." Joubert, 178.

drink. Even the appearance of the child might be made radically different from either of his parents. Tales abounded of aristocratic children exposed to “the evil nourishment of the nurse” and thus taking on her “bad nature,” anxieties that were all too often coupled with suspicions about the character of lower-class nurses.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, wet-nursing posed a threat to the affective bond between mother and child, verging on religious significance. In the eyes of Renaissance physiology, “the loving mother, like the pelican who is also a symbol for Christ, feeds her child with her own blood.”<sup>73</sup> The physiological understanding of conception and nursing thus simultaneously drew upon and was supported by more sentimental considerations about motherly love.

The notion of the transmission of humors was a concept deeply connected to the cultural construction of the nursing ideal, as essential to not only the maternal bond, but the proper development of the child. The transformation that followed exposure to “the milk of a stranger” was not correctible even later in life. The child was prevented from ever taking on “the condition of its own mother,” thus rendering him disobedient, immoral, or otherwise deviant.<sup>74</sup> A stranger’s milk could even override all familial sentiment, once again, erasing all traces of the child’s heritage. According to Joubert, “the spirit of the nurse, carried by her milk, has such great power to mislead natural feeling into different habits and natures from those with which it was previously inculcated, by the seed of father and mother.”<sup>75</sup> The poet Fiefmelin described the lasting influence that the milk could have over both the body and soul of the pliable infants in their charge in appropriately dramatic language:

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<sup>72</sup> De Minut, 91.

<sup>73</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 132.

<sup>74</sup> Antonio de Guevara, *L’Horloge des Princes*, trans. Nicholas d’Herberay, (Anvers, 1592), 292.

<sup>75</sup> Joubert, 179.

The strange breast imparts to the infant,  
 The evil humors of his infected nurse,  
 Not just those of the body. Titus got  
 His sickly body from the teat, as that drink may do!  
 But there remains in the soul of the boy,  
 A character imprinted by the bad milk that he sucks, [...]  
 Such is the power of the milk to form the man unformed.  
 In manners as in body they conform to their nurses,  
 A man may be judged based on how he is nursed.<sup>76</sup>

Physicians repeated the same long-standing anxieties deployed by their literary and religious counterparts; particularly, the power of low-born nurses to alter the character of the child, and appeals to nature and classical sources in favor of a “natural” motherhood. Scientific discourse was in this way deeply connected to a cultural ideal that increasingly stressed breastfeeding as an obligation and a duty for mothers. It was also often tinged with the same biting stereotypes of laziness, promiscuity, and vanity that plagued mothers in the popular literature. Much like Rousseau’s later arguments in the same vein, which painted a largely sentimental picture of the maternal bond, early modern writers believed breast milk to have a physiological, as well as affective importance in child-parent relations. Guillemeau expressed this with a popular proverb: “*nourriture passe nature.*”<sup>77</sup> In the early modern mindset, nurture, in the most literal sense, always beat out nature.

### ***Mère Entière: A New Maternal Ideal***

In all cases, moralistic authors equated maternal love with maternal breastfeeding and established it as the theoretical domestic ideal for women. From a social standpoint, it was argued that wet-nursing weakened familial bonds, causing children to be more

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<sup>76</sup> “*Le tetin estranger depart à l’enfancon / Les malignes humeurs de sa nourrice infecte, / Non seulement de corps. Tite tint de la tette / Son corps si maladi tant peut cette boisson! / Mais il demeure encor’ dans l’ame du garçon / Un character empreint du mauvais laict qu’il tette. / Telle est du laict la force à former l’homme informe, / Tant en moeurs comme au corps aux nourrices conforme / Selon qu’il est nourry chacun est estimé.*” Fiefmelin, 106-7.

<sup>77</sup> Guillemeau, 389.

obedient to their *nourrice* than to their own mothers. As Laurent Joubert argued: “Mothers who send away and abandon their children in this way, giving them to another to nurse,” stripped away the essential bond “with which nature joins mothers and fathers with their children.”<sup>78</sup>

The contemporary language of familial duty, which emphasized a hierarchical family structure and a quasi-feudal web of obligations owed between parents and children, the nourishment of the maternal breast was identified among the supreme duties mothers owed their offspring. In his moralistic work, *L’Institution de la femme chrestienne*, Juan Luis Vivès numbers among the appropriate “ornaments” of virtuous married women those of true modesty, especially “nursing her children, and doing her duty in domestic work.”<sup>79</sup> Parents were also told that they owed their children “*l’Amour, l’Instruction, et l’Aliment*” above all else.<sup>80</sup> Mothers especially carried the bulk of this obligation, as the maternal role came to be redefined in language that stressed its tenderness and love. Maternity alone was no longer the accomplishment of womanhood, but the injunction to nurse, and to love, one’s children.

Moralists and humanists counterpoised the threat of imperfect motherhood with a model of the “good” mother. Unsurprisingly, “good” mothering was defined based upon nursing. Reviving classical arguments, sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers argued that one could not be a “full and complete mother” the crowning title of early modern motherhood, without nursing one’s own child. A mother who sent her child to a wet

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<sup>78</sup> “*Les meres qui abandonment ainsi & renvoient leurs enfans, les donnent aux autres à nourrir, retranchent ce lien, & ceste colle d’amitié, de laquelle nature conioint les peres & meres avecques leurs enfans.*” Joubert, 179.

<sup>79</sup> “*L’honneste dame prend vrays aornemens de aornemens de pudicité, en nourrissant ses enfans, et faisant son devoir, tant au faict domesticque, que en la gloire du mary.*” Juan Luis Vivès, *L’Institution de la femme chrestienne*, trans. Louis Vivès (Antwerp, 1579), 208.

<sup>80</sup> “*Quand il les leur a donnez, ils leur doivent l’Amour, l’Instruction, & l’Aliment.*” Jean Cordier, *La famille sainte* (Lyon, 1656), iv.

nurse “would never be but a half-mother and not complete when she does not nourish what she has born.”<sup>81</sup> In a burgeoning body of pedagogical and other popular texts directed at pious mothers, the threat of being only a “half-mother” is raised time and again in similar language. Moralist Jean Talpin threatened, “The mother who does not nurse or feed her child is not a whole mother.”<sup>82</sup> Pierre Viret’s definition of womanly duty is even more restricted to the work of reproduction, claiming that, “a woman is half a mother by giving birth, and half a mother by the nourishment of her young.”<sup>83</sup> Mothers not only violated the dictates of nature by denying their children the maternal breast, but in theory lost even a full claim to their child’s making.

Literary sources also paid homage to the figure of the *mère entiere*, and served to paint a more sentimental image of the joy of nursing one’s own child. In the *contes* of Charles Perrault, the decision to breastfeed was a moral imperative. The ideal of *mère-nourrice* even figures briefly as a sort of moral heroine. The tortured but virtuous heroine of Perrault’s “Griseldis” bemoans her moral failure as a mother, should she ignore the cries of her child:

“Oh!” She said, “How could I exempt myself,  
From what her cries demand of me,  
Without showing extreme ingratitude?  
For reasons contrary to nature,  
Could I very well choose, for my child that I love,  
To be but half a mother?”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Jean Talpin, *La police chrestienne au roy* (Paris, Nicholas Chesneau: 1568), 200.

<sup>82</sup> “Car pour en dire le vray la mere qui n’allait ni nourrit pas son enfant n’est point entière mère.” Pierre Viret, *Exposition de la doctrine de la foy chrestienne, touchant la vraye cognoissance et le vray service de Dieu et la Trinité des personnes* (Lyon, 1601), 264.

<sup>83</sup> “Car la femme est moitié mere par l’enfanter, & moitié mere par le nourrissement de son fructs.” De Guevara, 283.

<sup>84</sup> “Elle voulut la nourrir elle-même : / Ah ! dit-elle, comment m’exempter de l’emploi, / Que ses cris demandent de moi, / Sans une ingratitude extrême ? / Par un motif de nature ennemi, / Pourrais-je bien vouloir, de mon enfant que j’aime, / N’être la mère qu’à demi ?” Charles Perrault, *Contes de Fées*. Vol. 1. (Leipzig: Charles François Korhler, 1796), 151. Originally published, 1697.



Elsewhere, Perrault links the refusal of mothers to nurse their own children, even at this risk of being “only a half mother” with the decadence and extravagance of the metropolis, where it would truly be a miracle to find a “such a patient lady” among the ranks of the “fair sex, born to please” and yet “so full of bad vices,” further connecting a failure in maternal duty to a broader corruption of societal morals.<sup>85</sup>

Medical texts, once again, were both informed by and served to bolster this notion. The potential to transmit foreign character traits and potentially disrupt lineage was a common anxiety. Most commonly, writers argued that the milk of a strange woman could so fundamentally alter the character and appearance of a child as to render him unrecognizable to his parents. Jean Liébault advised mothers that should she want to be the “whole and complete mother of her child,” that she must “keep him in her house and nurse him from her own breasts which she was given by nature for this purpose.”<sup>86</sup> Like other medical writers, Liébault argues from a purely physiological perspective, especially the Renaissance conflation of breast milk with menstrual blood (which was believed to nourish the child in the womb). A mother risked her biological claim by stripping her child of the same substance with which he was supposedly “nourished in her womb,” supplementing it instead with an “unfamiliar” milk.<sup>87</sup> Given the moral and religious importance of nursing, this further threatened the social claims of mothers over her offspring. In this way, the medical dangers of wet-nursing had social consequences for family life, and—purely in a philosophical sense—could even strip a mother of her

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>86</sup> “*Si l’accouchée veut estre toute & entiere mere de son enfant...[elle] le doit retenir en sa maison & le nourrir de ses propres mammelles qu’elle a recue de nature pour cest effect.*” Jean Liébault, *Trois livres appartenant aux infirmités et maladies des femmes* (Paris, 1582), 912.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

parental claims. Failure to nurse constituted an essential lapse in the act of mothering and would prevent a mother from ever being “*mère entière*” to her own child.<sup>88</sup>

### Conclusions

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a variety of cultural and scientific discourses intersected in order to establish a new maternal role for woman as both mother and nurse. Though in practice wet-nursing was the most popular choice in early modern France, in literate culture, the ideal child-rearing pattern was for mothers to nurse their own children. Prescribed by moralists, theologians, and physicians alike, this ideal was based on moral and theological notions about the tangible duties of a mother to her child. Not only was a mother who engaged a wet nurse only half a mother, but only half a woman because “a new philosophical, physiological, and moral obligation” defined nursing, and ultimately motherhood, as the essential sexual and moral function of women.<sup>89</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, this medico-philosophical discourse had firmly established this essential connection between womanhood and breastfeeding, as the primary distinction of women from men and, after childbearing, her primary responsibility. Eighteenth-century authors would make this connection more explicitly, as they elsewhere linked familial duty to public virtue. Physician Pierre Roussel defined maternal duty in no uncertain terms. He wrote, “When the woman has fulfilled this function [breastfeeding], which is one that distinguishes her especially from man, her task is finished.”<sup>90</sup> The editors of the *Encyclopédie* confirmed the dual purpose of womanhood

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<sup>88</sup> Jacques Guillemeau, *Les Oeuvres de chirurgie de Jacques Guillemeau* (Paris, 1649), 391.

<sup>89</sup> Jean Mainil, “Allaitement et contamination: Naissance de la Mère Nourrice dans le discours médical sous les Lumières,” *L'Esprit Créateur* 37 (1997) 3: 17.

<sup>90</sup> “*Je termine le tableau par cette fonction qui n'en est pas moins un devoir naturel pour les femmes, quoique la plupart d'entr'elles aient pris le parti de s'en dispenser...je veux dire l'allaitement. Lorsque la femme s'est acquittée de cette fonction, qui est une de celles qui la distinguent spécialement de l'homme, sa tâche est finie.*” Pierre Roussel, *Système physique et morale de la femme* (Paris, 1775), 34-5.

in both the 1765 articles “*Mère*” and “*Nourrice*,” which declare “the first duty of a mother is to nurse her children,” even recommending laws that would compensate women who chose to nurse.<sup>91</sup>

The refashioning of biological womanhood to center on reproductive ability constitutes what several historians of family life have linked to a broader effort to “manage women through motherhood.”<sup>92</sup> The indefinable and malleable otherness of native women opened up a window through which to condemn certain social practices and reinforce prevailing gender ideology, these criticisms extending to symbolize the decadence and moral deterioration of urban French society in general. The glorified vision of native maternity contained in texts on New France provide a more concrete model to abstract notions of “good” and “bad” mothering, when understood as a part of this moralizing discourse. The long-winded moralizing of travel writers was not so much an attempt to contextualize actual observations of native custom, but rather employed a mélange of arguments circulating in literate currents that sought to delimit the appropriate expression of motherhood. When understood as humanist literary productions, intended for a popular audience, the preoccupation of early French colonial writers with Native American child-rearing practices becomes less puzzling.

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<sup>91</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, vol. 23 (Geneva, 1778), 178.

<sup>92</sup> Valerie Lastinger, “Re-Defining Motherhood: Breast-Feeding and the French Enlightenment.” *Women’s Studies* 25 (1996) 6: 615.

## CHAPTER 3

### “LES SAUVAGES SONT VRAIEMENT NOBLES”: FEMALE VICE AS MORAL COUNTERPOINT TO A DECADENT FRANCE

#### **Why New France? Why France?**

In order to understand why maternity was such a salient point in idealizing native life and criticizing French degeneracy, an examination of how savage life otherwise served as a moral counterpoint to French society is helpful. The unique French conception of the New World itself, in part, facilitated a view of civilization and savage that was subject to inversion. A “noble savage” literary framework, and a colonial framework relatively amicable to native life combined to make New France a useful vehicle for commenting on the concerns of the Old. Whether menacing or benign, “savage” femininity was a particularly popular foil used to comment on the equally “savage” qualities of French society more broadly.

This perspective lends insight to the observations of recent historians of the “French global,” who argue that “Frenchness” itself was in a state of development and debate throughout the first two centuries of voyages. Commentaries on New France provided an outlet for both a reflection and reimagining of selfhood within a new “French global sensibility,” one that often wavered between Eurocentrism and self-criticism. This theory of nascent Frenchness, as discussed in the works of Conly and Wintroub draws

upon and complicates a long tradition of “noble savage” literature, suggesting that the French colonial discourse was unique in the willingness of many of its writers to turn a critical lens onto their own culture, rather than merely regurgitating a one-sided validation of European superiority.<sup>93</sup>

### **Early French Colonialism**

The unique nature of French colonial missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in part explains the willingness to export a maternal ideal, constructed in France, transposing something benign and familiar, even laudable, onto a landscape of native difference otherwise characterized as “savage.” For one thing, the French presence in North America and the Caribbean was not firmly established in the same way as entrenched Spanish and English colonial empires until the seventeenth century, being a latecomer to the New World. Fierce competition with jealous Spain, in Europe as well as in the colonies, and the internal struggles posed by the French Wars of Religion, largely diverted royal attention from extensive colonial projects throughout the sixteenth century. Excluded from the papal Bulls of Donation of 1493, which divided the New World between Spain and Portugal, France was officially barred from colonization of America until François appealed to Clement VII in 1533 to lift the restrictions. Despite papal injunction and Spanish jealousy, several short-lived projects in North and South America, especially *France Antarctique* (1555-1564), founded as a haven for Protestants, and *France Équinoxiale* (1612-1615), as well as the Port-Royal settlement in Acadia (1605) were established. Still, prior to 1600, none failed to claim for France a political hold on

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<sup>93</sup> Tom Conly, “There’s a New World Here: *Pantagreur* via Oronce Finé,” in *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, eds. Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21. Michael Wintroub, *A Savage Mirror: Power, Identity, and Knowledge in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

the Americas comparable to that of the English, Spanish, or Dutch. The establishment of and Quebec (1608), later allied with Jesuit missions, was the most successful and longest lasting French attempt, but was mired by war and internal strife throughout its existence.

Unlike in the Iberian configuration, expansive conquest and settlement was not the primary stated aim of these otherwise disparate projects, nor did they have the support of a monarch bent on imperial domination outside of Europe. The language of colonial justification was often deeply imbedded in evangelical and moral purpose and the French church and state aggressively distributed material that described new lands to the reading public, as well as confirming the purpose of missions.<sup>94</sup> Though the church and state consistently sought to paint colonial subjects as “barbarians,” assimilation appears as a common aim in the *relations de voyages*, ideally to “form ‘one people’ with the French.”<sup>95</sup> The founding of *France Antarctique*, as a haven for Protestant refugees, was couched in the language of conversion, the evangelical mission of the entire mission being what made it, in the words of Lescarbot, “a most sanctified and truly heroic enterprise.”<sup>96</sup> Lescarbot is much more explicit, even attributing millenarian urgency to French colonization. Not only was the purpose of missions to “send French colonies to civilize the peoples there and make them Christians for their doctrine and example,” but to “make an alliance of the East with the West, the France Orientale with France Occidentale, and to convert many thousands of men to God before the coming of the end of the world, which advances quickly.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Sara Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 75.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> “*Une si sainte & vrayement heroïque entreprise*,” Léry, iv.

<sup>97</sup> “*Envoyer des colonies Françaises pour civiliser les peuples qui y sont, et les rendre Chrétiens pour leur doctrine et exemple... faire une alliance du Levant avec le Ponant, de la France Orientale avec*

Attesting to the moral urgency expressed by early French colonists, many authors cited the immoral actions of the Spanish in the New World, as well as those of fallen France, as a central motivation for French intrusion into unknown lands. Lescarbot and others criticized Spain for acting on the “pretense” of combatting the enemies of God, massacring native peoples rather than converting them.<sup>98</sup> Because the nature of French missions were framed for literate audiences as a renewal of Christian religion and French social morality, the colonial endeavor was one as much founded in contemporary philosophical, literary, and gendered discourses as in imperial or inquisitive impulse.

Official policy in regards to intermarriage with native peoples also reflected the aims of the early French colonial missions. French colonial policy endorsed “Francisation” or assimilation with native subjects, a fact which has led many historians to characterize early French colonization in the New World as more “tolerant” or “pluralistic” than their competitors. Beginning in the 1660s, colonial administrators encouraged intermarriage as a means to replicate French “civilization” in the New World and correct chronic under-population, especially in North American colonies. Because official discourse looked on intermarriage between French men and native women favorably, this may explain a willingness to portray native women as being particularly receptive to conversion and to European norms. In some cases, their moral qualities even exceeded those of European women.

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*l'Occidentale, et convertir tant de milliers d'hommes à Dieu avant que la consommation du monde vienne, laquelle s'avance fort.*” Lescarbot, 217.

<sup>98</sup> “*Je ne voudrais pourtant exterminer ces peuples ici, comme a fait l'Hespagnol ceux des Indes Occidentales prennant le pretexte des commandimés faits jadis à Iofué, Gedeon, Saul, et autres combattas pour les peuples de Dieu.*” Lescarbot, 492.

In this respect, the symbology of the maternal at times bolstered the particular aims of the various French colonial missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. De Rochefort, a Protestant pastor to the French-speaking Caribbean, devotes the second part of his work (as was customary from Lescarbot onward) to the customs of the indigenous people of the region. Anticipating a new wave of persecution in the 1670s, his work was written primarily as a propagandist text intended to attract French Protestants to New France.<sup>99</sup> Thus it portrays Native Americans as being particularly susceptible to conversion and the adoption of European mannerisms. Not only that, he describes women as being particularly receptive to European reproductive norms, and portrays them as superior mothers and nurses, rivaling even the ancient peoples of Germany. Considering the importance that both state and church placed on the conversion of native peoples, propagandists placed great emphasis on the susceptibility of native peoples to evangelization, and their consent to French presence. In this way, the benign otherness of a naturalized motherly love, supposedly long lost in France, dovetailed perfectly with the assimilationist agenda envisioned by Lescarbot, his sixteenth-century predecessors, and the confessional missions of the seventeenth century, who looked on colonial endeavor as a redemptive process, to be accomplished through religious and moral unity with the idealized utopia of New France and the creation of “one people.” However, like the French presence in America itself, the vision of a unified, colonial France was short-lived. The failure of France to properly evangelize and “francisize” the natives by the late seventeenth century led to disillusionment and fears that the assimilationist mission and its optimistic representations of native peoples were wrong. Rather than creating

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<sup>99</sup> Benoît Roux, “Le pasteur Charles de Rochefort et l’Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l’Amérique.” *Cahiers d’Histoire de l’Amérique Latine* 5 (2011): 177.



Champlain's virtuous "one people," trade and experiments with intermarriage had, in the eyes of contemporaries, created a regressive, barbarous, and altogether "different people."<sup>100</sup>

### *Bons Sauvages*

The construction of the "mother-type" in America revealed a preoccupation of confessional missions with correcting and commenting upon French social anxieties, even above maintaining rigid hierarchies of difference with cultural others or pursuing an agenda of conquest on the scale attempted by other European nations. However, the unique circumstances of the French colonial enterprise cannot alone explain the use of an exotic "heathen morality" as a literary foil to Old France. Most famously associated with Montaigne, much of early modern French writing on the New World took a positive view of Native American life. French writers eagerly endorsed the "Black Legend" of Spanish cruelty towards American innocents, but were just as willing to counterpoise that innocence to a morally degenerate France for the sake of literary convenience.<sup>101</sup> Early modern writing on New World peoples betrays many contradictory tensions in confronting and describing cultural others. The origins of the *bon sauvage* myth are generally ascribed to Montaigne who, in his essay, "Des Cannibales" famously transposed the rumors of cannibalism Léry described among the Tupinamba of Brazil onto sixteenth-century French society.<sup>102</sup> The French themselves become the true barbarians, equally nude in their empty morality. This rhetoric was couched in a preoccupation with the contemporary woes of a perceivably fallen France, divided by

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<sup>100</sup> Belmessous, 578.

<sup>101</sup> For example, Charlotte C. Wells, "Loathsome Neighbors and Noble Savages: The *monde inversé* of Antoine de Montchrétien," *L'Esprit Créateur* 48 (2008): 96.

<sup>102</sup> Dudley M. Marchi, "Montaigne and the New World: The Cannibalism of Cultural Production" *Modern Language Studies* 23 (1993): 35.

confessional conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Manipulating the reports of native cannibalism given by contemporary *cosmographes*, Montaigne argued that the French had themselves become an even worse sort of cannibal in light of the recent barbarity of the Wars of Religion, devouring their fellow “neighbors and citizens...on the pretext of piety and religion.”<sup>103</sup>

This willingness to suspend the traditional hierarchy of savage and civilized was characteristic of the later French missions, both Protestant and Catholic. At times, this suspension was purely colonial strategy. These accounts often paint a similar picture of a degenerate and fallen France, though largely with the intent of attracting settlers and validating the feasibility of evangelical missions. In the words of the missionary Jesuit Father Allouez, “The name of savage raises an idea so disadvantageous to those who wear it, many people in Europe think it impossible to make them into true Christians...” Yet, in fact, he argued, “Not only are there true Christians among these savage peoples, but there are more even in proportion to our civilized Europe.”<sup>104</sup> Still, lax in morality and divided by religious conflict, the French were portrayed as being outdone by even the primitive simplicity of native life, from the earliest missions to Brazil in the sixteenth century. An ode that appeared in the front matter of André Thevet’s celebrated *Singularités de la France antarctique* sets forth this apparent moral failure of Old France as a primary motivation for the settlement of New France. Although the poet ultimately blames Protestants for the conflict, his words sound a general lament for the barbarity and artifice of French society during the Wars of Religion: “One would find that Arctic [Old]

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<sup>103</sup> “Je pense qu’il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant qu’à le manger mort... (comme nous l’avons, non seulement leu, mais veu de fresche memoire, non entre des ennemis anciens, mais entre des voisins et concitoyens, et, qui pis est, sous pretexte de pieté et de religion),” Michel de Montaigne, “Des Cannibales,” in *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne* (Paris, 1595), 123.

<sup>104</sup> *Rélations inédites de la Nouvelle-France, 1672-1679*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1861), 186.

France has more monsters, I believe, and is more barbarous than Antarctic France [Brazil].” While “barbarians walk all naked,” Frenchmen “walk made up and masked.”<sup>105</sup> The idealization of native barbarity, contrasted with the failings of civilization, was characteristic even of the differing confessional missions to New France. Almost a century later, the Protestant pastor Charles de Rochefort concurred in his assessment of the people of the Antilles, arguing, “Sometimes there are more apparent virtues among the heathens than among many of those who call themselves Christians.”<sup>106</sup>

More often than not, these paradoxical representations of native nudity were directly linked to the evangelical, assimilationist aims of most of the early French missions, both Protestant and Catholic. Though Thevet’s assessment of native purity is ultimately not as forgiving as Léry and Lescarbot’s, the redemptive purpose of the mission is the same. For Thevet, the only hope for France is to redirect their attention to New France, embarking on a pious mission that will “separate the goats from the lambs” and thus cure the people of France of their twofold vices, ignorance and excessive zeal.<sup>107</sup>

Inverting the hierarchy of cultural superiority allowed writers to criticize French society in support of a number of different agendas, both colonial and evangelical, even by those who had never travelled outside of Europe. Historians have frequently addressed how this imagined vision of “*bon sauvages*” and the “*rêve américain*” became a sort of rhetorical tradition that likened native simplicity to a state of past humanity. The pre-

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<sup>105</sup> “*Le pays qu’il nous faut aymer, / Il trouverait la France Arctique / Avoir plus de monstres je croy / Et plus de barbarie en foy / Que n’a pas ta France Antarctique. / Ces barbares marchent tous nuds, / Et nous nous marchons incognus, / Fardez, masquez. Ce peuple estrange / A la pieté ne se range.*” Etienne Iodelle, “Ode,” in André Thevet, *Singularités de la France antarctique* (Paris, 1658), xlv-xlvi. Originally published 1557; Saliha Belmessous, “Greatness and Decadence in French America.” *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 564.

<sup>106</sup> “Charles De Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l’Amérique, Livre second* (Rotterdam, 1658), 283.

<sup>107</sup> “*Separans les boucs des agneaux, / Oster en France deux bandeaux. / Au peuple celuy d’ignorance, / A eux celuy de leur ardeur.*” Iodelle, xlv.

classical past, especially for seventeenth-century commentators, seemed bound to an innocence and purity that had since only degraded, leading to a nostalgia for a primitive past and a heightened consciousness of the decadence of modern society. In the eighteenth century, the primitivist Rousseau, who never travelled outside of Europe, and Diderot, who certainly never visited his relativist projection of Tahiti, became the later inheritors of this conveniently self-critical allegory, turning a previously colonial and moralistic agenda into a space of philosophic contemplation on human nature and civilization broadly.<sup>108</sup>

Largely absent from scholarship on the “*bon sauvage*” trope is how gender operated in this self-critical discourse, supporting both the aims of the French colonial mission and contemporary moralistic debates on the degeneracy of civilization. On the one hand, writers mobilized the deviant sexual mores of indigenous women as a means of negotiating dominance in the colonial sphere, demonstrating the receptiveness of Native American peoples to both evangelization and francization. On the other, gendered vice was easily and frequently reversed as a criticism of French women and urban society broadly, paralleling ongoing cultural debates on the role of women in early modern public life. Criticism of French women at once reinforced contemporary configurations of mothering, and figured into a larger statement about the relative nature of civilization and the place of France in a newly emergent and largely hierarchical “global sensibility.”<sup>109</sup>

The need to establish cultural alterity on the one hand, or proximity on the other, paralleled equally gendered debates in France over the depravity of a Christian society

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<sup>108</sup> See Denis Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, in John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler, eds., *Diderot: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Annick Benoît-Dusauroy, *Lettres européennes: Manuel d'histoire de la littérature européenne* (Brussels: De Boeck), 15.

<sup>109</sup> Conly, 21.

that had been marred by the excesses of both war and aristocratic society. Nudity and female promiscuity were two recurrent points that focused this self-critical discourse onto the female body, as a means of measuring both cultural proximity, as well as distance.

### **Inverting Female Barbarity: *Une Bonne Sauvage*?**

Nudity, a commonly sexualized marker of native inferiority, was frequently inverted and transposed onto the moral landscape of Old Europe. Female nudity was commonly cited as evidence of the savagery of the native peoples of New France, and examples abound of the licentious nature of native nudity, particularly on the part of women. However, early modern writings also counterpoise nudity to the artifice and luxurious taste of European women. Protestant Jean de Léry's 1578 account, *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil*, suggests that the female Tupinamba of Brazil, even in their shocking and shameless nudity, were still morally exemplary to the corrupted women of France. Responding to readers who might assume that the constant nudity of the young Tupinamba might incite them to debauchery and lubricity, Léry writes "that the overdress, makeup, false wigs, twisted hair, great ruffed collars, dresses upon dresses, and other endless trifles with which the women and girls alter themselves and never have enough of over here, are without comparison the cause of more evil than the ordinary nudity of the savage women."<sup>110</sup> Later influencing Montaigne, his criticism of female excesses fits into a larger rhetorical envisioning of "barbarous" mid-sixteenth century France, recently recovered from the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacres, in

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<sup>110</sup> "Que les attifets, fards, fausses perruques, cheveux tortillez, grands collets fraisez, vertugales, robes sur robes, et autres infinies bagatelles dont les femmes et filles de par-deça se contrfont et n'ont jamais assez, sont sans comparaison cause de plus de maux que n'est la nudité ordinaire des femmes sauvages." Jean de Léry, *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil* (Paris: 1587), 197.

which his fellows behaved “in a way more barbarous and cruel than the savages.”<sup>111</sup> Léry is willing to interpret the cannibalism and nudity of the natives, not as evidence of their inherent sinfulness, but of their moral superiority over the excesses of Europeans, an observation that is later reflected in Montaigne’s criticism of French society. In fact, it is the French, in Léry’s experience, who have time and again turned upon their fellow man, demonstrating a sort of metaphorical moral nudity. The mission of *France Antarctique* as a haven for French Protestants failed after only a few years when the leader of the expedition, Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, expelled the Huguenot settlers from the colony, forcing them to take refuge with the Tupinamba, before finally returning to France.<sup>112</sup>

Aside from cannibalism, critiques that attacked the supposed moral degeneracy of a divided France generally were often symbolized in observations that centered on sexuality, reproduction, and the female body. Nudity, like cannibalism was excusable for those presumed to already be living in barbarity because of its honesty and its modesty, in opposition to the artificiality of aristocratic life and hypocrisy of divided Christendom. Though certain moralists expressed horror at the nudity of native peoples, others exploited it as a rhetorical tool by which to point out the moral deficiencies of civilized society. The constant nakedness of women in America did nothing to “evoke any thought that harms modesty,” and, humorously, was hardly more indecent than the practice of the Romans who “laid down nude in the sun, just to get a tan.”<sup>113</sup> Native nudity was

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<sup>111</sup> “*D’une façon plus barbare et cruelle que celle des sauvages.*” Léry, 376.

<sup>112</sup> Thierry Wanegffelen, “Rio ou la vraie Réforme: La « France Antarctique » de Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon entre Genève et Rome,” in *Aux temps modernes: naissance du Brésil*, 161-175 (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998), 163.

<sup>113</sup> “*Cette vuë ne fait naître aucune idée qui blesse la pudeur, à cause de la coûtume constante de toutes les nations, qui n’en font aucune difficulté...on regardait aujord’hui comme la chose du monde la plus indécente une coûtume que les Romains les plus severes observaient avec soin, c’est de se promener,*

comparable even to the simplicity, as well as the excesses, of the classical past. Even outside the context of war-torn France, in the late seventeenth century, nudity remained a source of contemplation on the demerits of civilization and its excesses, and writers continued to draw apologetic parallels between native nudity and the pagan morality of ancient Rome. George Guillet de Saint-George likened it to that of the women of ancient Sparta: though they danced naked, “public virtue covered them.” Though he would not deign to excuse “public nudity” for the women of contemporary France, he observes in defense of Sparta, “There are still today many places in North America where the women are always in that state of those who danced in Sparta. However, all of our travelers assure us that the shame of it is entirely absent.”<sup>14</sup> In the absence of shame, the nudity of Native American women is given as evidence of their Edenic innocence, further justified by a linkage to the classical past.

For confessional France, the moral counterpoint provided by native nudity of women in Brazil as well as in “*Amérique Septentrionale*” served as a particularly salient reminder of how important clothing was in defining gendered societal norms and behavior. It is the overdress of aristocratic women in Old Europe, rather than a lack of it in the New, that most attracts the attention of colonial writers. Claude Abbeville, a Franciscan monk who accompanied a second 1611 French mission to Brazil, similarly exalts the nudity of the native women of the Caribbean, transforming this paradoxical image of debauchery and chastity into an attack on the women of old Europe. He writes

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*demeurer couché nud au Soleil, seulement pour y prendre une couleur bazanée.*” Jacques Bernard, *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*, vol. 7 (Amsterdam, 1688), 78-9.

<sup>14</sup> “*Les Filles de Sparte n’étaient point nues, l’honnesteté publique les couvrait...je ne vous diray pas que leur excuse fut une excuse pour nous; Mais enfin il y a encore aujourdhuy quantité de lieux dans l’Amérique Septentrionale, où les femmes paraissent toujours dans l’état de celles qui dansaient à Sparte.*” George Guillet de Saint-George, *Lacedemone ancienne et nouvelle. Ou l’on voit les moeurs, et les coutumes des Grecs modernes, des Mahometans, et des Juifs du pays* (Paris, 1679), 168.

that they, “they do not give a great sense of aversion, their nudity not being perhaps so dangerous or so attractive as the lewd excesses, unrestrained pretentiousness, and new inventions of the ladies of over here, which cause more mortal sins and ruin more souls than do Indian women and girls with their brutal and odious nudity.”<sup>115</sup> Though the women of New France are often nude or nearly nude, they are not nearly so morally naked as their overdressed French counterparts. In a humorous tone, he likens the way the Tupinamba women pierced their ears and “put wooden rollers as big around as a thumb and as long as a finger in the holes...taking as much pleasure in wearing these beautiful pendants, and feeling as well-dressed with these wooden rollers, as do the ladies of this country with their fat pearls and rich diamonds.”<sup>116</sup> Beyond the mere trappings of luxury, however, the effeminate sin of overdress also figured into a larger literary preoccupation with the moral degradation of France within the context of the Wars of Religion. Even famed poet Pierre de Ronsard, participating in characteristic “miserics of our time” style, equated the artificial civility of noblemen during the Wars of Religion with effeminacy, and mourns the consequences of overcivilization, in the form of overdress and mindless violence. Above all, he denounces the hypocrisy of confessional strife as being itself a form of deceitful overdress: “Your hatreds, your discords, your private quarrels/ are the reasons why your hands are covered with blood/ and not religion, which

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<sup>115</sup> “*La difformité ordinaire ne donne pas peu d’aversion, la nudité de soy n’estant peut estre si dangereuse ny si attrayante que sont les attifets lubriques avec les effrenées mignardises et nouvelles inventions des Dames de par-deçà, qui causent plus de pechez mortels et ruinent plus d’âmes que ne font les femmes et filles Indiennes avec leur nudité brutale et odieuse.*” Claude d’Abbeville, *Histoire de la Mission des Pères Capucins en l’Isle de Maragnan* (Paris, 1614), 197.

<sup>116</sup> “*Les femmes n’ont point la leure percée...mettent dedas les trous, des rouleaux de bois gros comme le poulce et long environ comme le doigt...si est-ce qu’elles prennent autant de plaisir à porter ces beaux pendans, et s’estiment aussi braves avec ces rouleaux de bois, que font les Dames de par deca avec leurs grosses perles et riches Diamans.*” Abbeville, 169.



you only use as a veil under which your disguise is hidden.”<sup>117</sup> This preoccupation with the dangers of overcivilization haunted writers hoping to pursue a religious colonial enterprise in New France and gave credence to an “assimilationist” mission that could potentially redeem Christian France as well as the heathen New World.

In this way, the image of the nude female Native American is transformed to fit the misogynistic and moralistic stereotypes of Old France, only recently emerged from the bloody Wars of Religion, where the coquettish behavior of wealthy “married women [who] perfumed and painted themselves like whores”<sup>118</sup> was a popular object of attack, as symbolic of modern discord and moral instability. For both L ry and Abbeville, the nude female Native American, long used to mark an unmistakable alterity by their masculine European observers, figures into a larger statement about “over here” and the true nature of civilization, a statement undoubtedly just as much informed by and concerned with explaining French social developments as those of “over there.” In either case, female vice becomes symbolic of the degeneracy of French civilization broadly and is directly connected to the decadence and extravagance of urban life.

This comparative inversion mirrors an evolving discourse in early modern France that highlighted the luxury and vanity of bourgeois women as evidence of French decadence and, as shall be seen, increasingly espoused a particularly narrow domestic and biological role for women. A growing body of seventeenth-century homiletic literature, also published in the vernacular, portrayed European women of being guilty of both under and overdress, simultaneously vain and nude. Prescriptivist author Jean Pipet

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<sup>117</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, *Remonstrance au peuple de France* (Paris : Buon, 1563), 11.

<sup>118</sup> “*La France...où les femmes mari es se parfument et se fardent comme des putains, n’hesitant pas   travestir la nature sous le mensonge flatteur du v tement.*” Quoted in Frank Lestringant, *Jean de L ry ou l’invention du sauvage* (Paris: H. Champion, 2005), 197.

preached vehemently against female vanity, which he identifies as being simultaneously “an excess of clothing and the nudity of their bodies,” as well as the “most common and public sin in the world today.” It is implied that such moral and literal nudity are more befitting of pagan than Christian women.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, what is really at stake in these contradictory depictions and inversions is not so much a valorization of Native American femininity as it is a means of carrying a domestic debate on female moderation onto new subjects, who could stand in for literate idealization of female behavior. As in most of the comparisons drawn between native women and their Old World counterparts the issue of “artifice” and “*paillardise*,” or lewd excess is a central criticism. The exotic women of North America are shamelessly nude and sexually active to the point of excess, while at the same time Christian women are portrayed as hypocritically seductive and duplicitous, their penchant for rich dress and makeup only used to disguise their true debauchery. Though both constitute forms of sexual excess, they sit at extreme ends of the spectrum of immoderate behavior. The “savage” practices of female natives thus provide—or rather, are constructed as—a convenient foil to their equally immoderate European counterparts, so often disparaged for their “luxury, vanity, and libertinage” in the moral and pedagogical manuals of the time.<sup>120</sup> At least for several French authors, alterity provided an allegorical pretext with

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<sup>119</sup> “*Les pêchés les plus communs, et les plus publics, à present parmi le monde, sont les vanitez des filles et des femmes ; ces vanitez consistent aux excés de leurs habits et aux nuditez de leurs corps.*” Jean Pipet, *Instructions chrétiennes sur le luxe des femmes* (Paris, 1678), 546.

<sup>120</sup> Nicholas de Dijon, *Sermons sur tous les Évangiles du Carême prêchez par le R. P. Nicolas de Dijon* (Lyon, 1692), 158.

which to reinforce longstanding stereotypes of European women, whose excesses supposedly surpassed those of even the nude and “savage” women of New France.<sup>121</sup>

As oddly out of place as long-winded digressions on proper female behavior and dress may seem in the work of the early cosmographers, their meaning becomes clear within the context of the contemporary dialogue on gender in early modern France. In their encounters with forms of femininity that proved difficult to categorize, early modern writers shaped their accounts around a conception of gender with which they were familiar—one which provided an equally immoderate extreme of female sexuality, comparable even to native nudity. Though still fundamentally informed by a discourse that highlighted native strangeness, many of the *relations de voyage* present a much more contentious image of femininity in New France, in contrast to supposedly “civilized” France. Still, both Native American peoples and French women remain effectively otherized in this discourse—native women for the undeniable strangeness of their nude bodies, French women for their excess of dress.

As Léry especially makes clear, though, this rhetorical inversion of savage and civilized was as much about gender as larger ongoing social concerns in France—specifically the brutal Wars of Religion, at that time still fresh in recent memory. Female vice is thus mobilized as a critique not just of appropriate gender behavior, but becomes a criticism of urban, bourgeois society broadly. A preoccupation with conflicting forms of excess is symbolic of a heightened consciousness of French decadence and the dangers of overcivilization, as frequently expressed in both narratives of travels and in moralistic writings on motherhood and family life in Old France.

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<sup>121</sup> Frank Lestringant, “Lectures croisées de Jean de Léry: À propos du ‘Bréviaire de l’ethnologue,’” in Christian Delacroix, ed., *Michel de Certeau: Les Chemins d’histoire*, 55-75 (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2002), 70.

A preoccupation with maternal duty and reproductive norms, however, further destabilizes the contentious hierarchy of colonizer and colonized. Writers of *relations de voyage* borrowed condemnatory descriptions of native maternity from a growing pseudo-medical tradition that also sought to condemn perceived female excess and redefine mothering based upon maternal nursing. Many sources consciously invert the traditional Eurocentric hierarchy to the point of nearly mythologizing Native American maternity, reproduction, and childrearing practices as a means of criticizing the behavior of French women and reinforcing a narrow, and purely philosophical maternal ideal.

In the context of contemporary conceptions of gender, it is clear that a literate maternal idealism unavoidably shaped the way in which European observers described native maternity. Next under examination will be how authors of travel narratives and cosmographies uniquely tailored their descriptions of native women to fit within this literate tradition, and how these descriptions figured into a discourse that highlighted female moral excess as representative of European moral failure. While in some sense these authors of *relations de voyage* engaged in a sort of “self-critique” of degenerate French society, both native and European women remain effectively “otherized” by this discourse.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSTRUCTING A MATERNAL UTOPIA IN NEW FRANCE: THE MÈRE ENTIÈRE IN AMERICA

Not content with having ceased to suckle their children, women no longer wish to do it; with the natural result—motherhood becomes a burden... They will destroy their work to begin it over again, and they thus turn to the injury of the race... This practice, with other causes of depopulation, forebodes the coming fate of Europe. Her arts and sciences, her philosophy and morals, will shortly reduce her to a desert. She will be the home of wild beasts, and her inhabitants will hardly have changed for the worse... Would you restore all men to their primal duties, begin with the mothers; the results will surprise you.<sup>122</sup>

It is not known if Jean-Jacques Rousseau gathered his impressions against swaddling and “in favor of breastfeeding” in his 1762 treatise on education, *Émile* from Chapter XVII of Jean de Léry’s Brazilian account from two centuries earlier. However, several marked similarities exist between Rousseau’s criticisms and several passages contained in Léry’s chapter “On the Treatment of Their Little Children.” Like Montaigne, who probably read the narratives of both Léry and Thevet, Rousseau was profoundly influenced by narratives of primitive culture, especially in the New World. Much as “Léry’s Brazilians were part of his mental image” in his discussion on primitive man in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, several marked similarities between Rousseau’s criticisms and several passages contained in Léry’s chapter “On the Treatment of Their Little Children” suggests a primitivist influence on Rousseau’s imagining of ideal

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<sup>122</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (London: J.M. Dent, 1911), 13-14.

motherhood and her “primal duties”.<sup>123</sup> Though devoid of the same political and demographic anxieties that informed Rousseau’s ill-boding critique of European wet-nursing, Léry harshly condemned what he perceived as the “inhumanity” of European women, and their failure to uphold that primal duty “of every species to care for and take pains to raise her brood herself.” Léry highlights the reproductive weakness of French women, who are so “delicate” that they would send away their child to a rural nurse, “without having any illness that might stop them from nursing their own children, like the American women do theirs,” further reinforcing the necessity of nursing to maternal love.<sup>124</sup> Though a world removed from the contemporary concerns of early modern France, the *relations de voyage*, especially the positive image of native maternity that they presented, were very much a part of an ongoing literate discussion of appropriate maternal duty.

Even where such influences are not as explicit, the way in which early modern travel writers engaged with unfamiliar practices and gender systems was very much embedded in a literate European discourse on maternity. In the New World, writers combined first-hand observation with outright fable to construct a parallel vision of complete motherhood on an exotic backdrop. Like the growing body of vernacular moralistic and medical literature that populated print-shops of the time, French narratives of travel also held a wide, literate audience, with a degree of readability that decidedly differentiated them from their “counterparts in England, Spain, and Holland, which were

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<sup>123</sup> For Jane Whatley’s comments, see Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, ed. Jane Whatley (University of California Press, 1990), 221.

<sup>124</sup> Léry, *Histoire*, 89.

not generally written for a wide, general public.”<sup>125</sup> Despite the limitations of the early French colonial enterprise in America, information and descriptions of New France and its peoples was a source of entertainment among the growing literate population. As Jean Chapelain, a member of the French Academy, observed in 1663, “Our nation has changed its reading tastes and instead of novels...travel narratives have become so prized that they are now popular at court and in the city.”<sup>126</sup> Especially in the case of highly charged topics like reproduction and maternity, rhetorical and propagandistic aims often superseded the interests of inquisitive description. Rather than an accurate account of his 1656 voyage to the French-speaking Caribbean, De Rochefort’s account in particular, along with “his noble style and his pointless digressions” make *L’Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l’Amérique* more an unreliable literary fiction that generalizes native customs across continents, than an accurate depiction of life in the Antilles.<sup>127</sup> This suggests that the circulation of dubious portrayals of native maternal simplicity in travel narratives was largely a literary one that transcended the differing confessional agendas of the individual French missions to the New World. An exoticized view of the maternal ideal presented a useful way to comment on contemporary concerns concerning maternal love and duty, for the same reason that the subject of cannibalism was useful to Montaigne’s criticism of war-torn France. Voyage literature in many instances both drew upon and influenced contemporary moral and philosophical thought on the nature of culture, civilization, and even questions of gender and familial duty.

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<sup>125</sup> Melzer, 76.

<sup>126</sup> “*Nostrre nation a changé de goust pour les lectures et, au lieu des romans...les voyages sont venus en crédit et tiennent le haut.*” Jean Chapelain, *Lettres de Jean Chapelain*, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1883), 340.

<sup>127</sup> Jacques De Dampière, *Essai sur les sources de l’histoire des Antilles Françaises (1492-1664)* (Paris: A. Picard, 1904), 137.

When early modern writers on the French New World are understood primarily as humanists in the context of contemporary literary tastes and convention, rather than explorers or colonialists, the influence of contemporary thought surrounding reproduction and the moralistic significance of the nursing breast becomes apparent. As Laura Fishman noted in her analysis of Claude d'Abbeville's seventeenth-century account of the Tupi people of Brazil, it is impossible to ignore the way native maternity functioned as a critique of the excesses of European women, when united with the campaign to make nursing the appropriate duty of womanhood.<sup>128</sup> For one, the arguments commonly drawn from classical and religious sources by contemporary moralists are immediately familiar, though transposed onto an exotic landscape. Writers deployed the superior maternal love and reproductive ability of Native American women as an attack on the excess and vice of European women, betraying a certain nostalgia for "the myth of the more primitive races of women" untainted by civilization.<sup>129</sup> The superior sexual regulation (even in their shameless nudity), care in nursing their own children, and primitive simplicity of Native American women are contrasted with the artificiality of European female manners and dress, and supported by analogy with classical sources and appeals to nature. As a result, the typical hierarchy of colonizer and colonized is repeatedly inverted on the subject of maternal nursing especially as it lends support to a literate, humanist tradition that sought to re-locate maternal love and reproductive duty in the breast.

Like their counterparts who wrote exclusively within the European tradition, travel writers employed the same digressive arguments from classical literature, affective piety, and moralistic critiques to affirm the virtuousness of a particularly narrow maternal

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<sup>128</sup> Fishman, 81.

<sup>129</sup> Worth-Stylianou, 73.



ideal. Ultimately, the paradoxical image of native womanhood trapped both European and native women. Even while writers were willing to invert the traditional hierarchy of colonizer and colonized on the subject of the maternal breast, they did so only at the expense of European women. While writers contrasted European women against the “barbarity” of native women as “proof of racial and class superiority,” it was their sameness that gave “an indication of their gendered inferiority in an interlocking network of hierarchies.”<sup>130</sup>

### **The Mother-Type in New France**

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, diverse writers and commentators on New France applied a strikingly similar and overtly positive description of mothering practices to native women, especially in the way they nursed their own children. Even over vast stretches of time and geographical distance, this image remained relatively stable, and was often used to reflect negatively upon the mothers of Old Europe. For writers in New France, motherly love opens up a convenient point of moralistic comparison between Old World and New, in which the standard hierarchy of colonizer and colonized is (temporarily) suspended, though at the expense of European noblewomen.

The subject of maternal breastfeeding opened up an unparalleled opportunity to wax didactic on French childrearing custom, transforming what is presented as an ethnographic perspective into something almost homiletic. Observing the practice of maternal breastfeeding among the women of the Antilles, Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat even praised native motherhood as “a great example for Christian women, to whom we have preached futilely to since the death of Sarah, Abraham's wife, and will

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<sup>130</sup> Nussbaum, 126.

continue preach to them regarding appearances until the end of the world, with as little fruit as when we preach the Gospel to the Caraïbes.”<sup>131</sup>

Though native women in other respects were criticized for their failure to conform to European norms, their superior maternal strength was always an object of the utmost praise. Similarly, observing the practice of maternal breastfeeding among the women of the Antilles, Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat praised the “simplicity” and “tranquility” of native motherhood as “a great example for Christian women.”<sup>132</sup> Again, in a popular compilation of travel narratives by Henri Justel in 1674, the indigenous women of Canada are denounced for their promiscuity and affinity for devil worship in the very same paragraph that they are praised for the strict abstinence practiced by pregnant and nursing women. This juxtaposition attests to the ambiguity of such praise.<sup>133</sup> The contentious image of native women in general, praised as mothers, but otherwise denounced as morally deviant, reflects the inordinate concern with which early modern travel writers approached the subject of the maternal.

The mythical strength of native women in childbearing, in parallel to maternal breastfeeding, served as one outlet for gendered comparison that centered a disproportionate amount of attention on maternal norms. Here, the Native American mother is cast as almost a prelapsarian Eve, feeling no pain in childbirth. Accustomed to

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<sup>131</sup> “Ils ont d’ailleurs une telle simplicité de vie, une telle tranquillité que l’on ne peut s’empêcher de les aimer et presque de les admirer... Quant aux femmes, on les habitué à les obéir avec exactitude, silence, douceur, et respect, grand exemple pour les femmes Chrétiennes, qu’on leur prêche inutilement depuis la mort de Sarah femme d’Abraham, et qu’on leur prêchera, selon les apparances, jusqu’à la fin du monde, avec aussi peu de fruit qu’on prêche l’Évangile aux Caraïbes” Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage Du Pere Labat, Aux Isles de L’Amerique*. VI, 113-20. Quoted in Gilbert Chinard, *L’Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1913), 268.

<sup>132</sup> “Quant aux femmes, on les habitué à les obéir avec exactitude, silence, douceur, et respect, grand exemple pour les femmes Chrétiennes.” Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage Du Pere Labat, Aux Isles de L’Amerique*. VI, 113-20. Quoted in Gilbert Chinard, *L’Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1913), 268.

<sup>133</sup> Henri Justel, *Recueil de divers voyages faits en Afrique et en l’Amérique* (Paris, 1674), 73.

a religious climate that emphasized the suffering of women in childbirth, native women's reproductive labor was often a source of wonder to commentators and one widely noted among scholars of "noble savage" literature. Most interesting, though, is the way in which writers reversed the stoicism of women in labor into a critique of their more "delicate" female counterparts. André Thevet claimed that French women in labor "cannot customarily endure so much pain as those in this country [Brazil] do."<sup>134</sup> Abbeville wondered at women who "remain no more than two or three more days to rest after childbirth," so unlike the women of Europe who, out of custom, typically remained confined to their bedchambers for up to six weeks after their labor.<sup>135</sup> This myth persisted even into early eighteenth century colonial literature, when De La Hontan noted that "Savage women give birth with an ease that our European women would have difficulty conceiving of, and their labor does not last more than two or three days."<sup>136</sup>

Ease in childbirth was frequently connected to the supposedly superior hardiness of native peoples in general. Though writers on New France often made similar arguments, often citing a milder climate, women's bodies and reproductive norms figure prominently in such assessments. Hennepin, a Franciscan priest and missionary that visited New France and the North American interior in 1675, devotes special attention to contrasting the robustness of native bodies to the weaknesses of Europeans in his account. This is something that he explicitly attributes to the ease with which Native American supposedly gave birth, in combination with the fact that they nursed their own children. He recorded: "Savage women give birth without much trouble... [They] will

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<sup>134</sup> "Elles n'endurent pas tant de mal coustumierement que celles de ce païs icy." Thevet, 195.

<sup>135</sup> "[Elles] ne demeurant ordinairement que deux ou trois jours au plus pour se reposer apres son enfantement." Abbeville, 281. Ulinka Rublack, "Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present* 27 (1996): 85.

<sup>136</sup> De La Hontan, *Voyages dans l'Amérique septentrionale*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam, 1705), 140.

deliver their children on their mats, without warning, and without making any noise. In the morning they get up and go to work ordinarily both in and out of the cabin, as if nothing had happened.”

The hardiness of native women in childbirth was inherited by their children as well: “Their children are very well made. We see very few of them who are hunchbacks or deformed. They have no natural defect in their bodies.”<sup>137</sup> He contrasts the love native women show their children through nursing them, in comparison to the “defects” of mothers who followed European nursing practices. Even in childbirth, “a work so beautiful and meritorious,” the weakness and moral infirmity of European women is again exposed, sorrowfully falling short of St. Paul’s claim to be able to “recognize the piety of the mother by the *bonne nourriture* of the children.”<sup>138</sup>

The same superior reproductive capabilities that rendered native women stoic in childbirth made them excellent nurses for their own children. Continuing his extended notes on the corporeal and reproductive strength of the women he observed, La Hontan claimed, “They almost never use nurses, unless they are indisposed, and they never wean their children, nursing them as long as they have milk, with which they are assuredly very well-supplied.”<sup>139</sup> Ease of giving birth and strength in childbirth symbolized a mental and emotional collectedness that rivaled even that of the Christian martyrs, in the eyes of European men, so accustomed to a devotional and medical culture of childbirth that

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<sup>137</sup> “*Les femmes Sauvages accouchent sans grande peine...[elles] se deliverent de leurs enfants sur leurs nattes, sans crier, et sans faire aucun bruit. Le matin elles se levent, et travaillent à l'ordinaire dans la Cabanne et dehors, comme si de rien n'était...et ce qu'il y a d'admirable, c'est que leurs enfants font fort bien faits. On en voit fort rarement parmi eux, qui soient bossus ou contrefaits. Ils n'ont aucun défaut naturel au corps.*” Hennepin, 180-1.

<sup>138</sup> Lescarbot, 782.

<sup>139</sup> “*Elles ne se servent quasi jamais de Nourrices, a moins qu'elles ne soient incommodées, et elles ne severent jamais leurs enfants, leur donnant la mamelle tout aussi longtemps qu'elles ont du lait, dont elles sont assurément très bien fournies.*” La Hontan, 140.

stressed the suffering of women. Labat explains this in a tone at once admiring of native strength and condemnatory of European weakness: “One would believe that they do not suffer in childbirth; but it is just they have enough courage and control to not show too much sensitivity on this occasion.”<sup>140</sup> This he links to the “general simplicity in life, such tranquility that one cannot stop himself from liking them and almost even admiring them,” especially the women, whom he found to be models of docility and dutifulness to their husbands. Even in the absence of Christian instruction, Lescarbot implies that reduced pain in childbearing was evidence of an essentially pious nature, approaching a sort of pagan morality on par with that of the classical past.<sup>141</sup> He concludes that native women, whose purity shone through in their fulfillment of their corporeal role as mothers, “would easily accommodate external provision, if they are cultivated” and instructed so as to correct their otherwise, “fierce and barbaric humor.”<sup>142</sup>

As much attention as childbirth elicited from European commentators, however, it did not elicit quite the same moralistic digression as did the issue of maternal breastfeeding. Nursing served as evidence of the superior love of native women for their children in parallel to observations on the physical qualities of native women. The subject of maternal love drew directly upon the moral arguments raised by humanists and physicians in favor of “natural” maternal sentiment. European women were not only reproductively weak, but were deficient mothers because they failed to demonstrate a normalized construction of maternal love. It was not so much the reproductive strength of

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<sup>140</sup> “On croirait qu’elles ne souffrent pas en accouchant ; mais c’est qu’elles ont assez de courage et d’empire sur elles mêmes pour ne point marquer trop de sensibilité en cette occasion.” Labat, 545.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> “Ce qui fait croire, que leur esprit s’accommoderait facilement à cette disposition extérieure, si on les cultivait, et si on entraît en commerce avec eux pour adoucir leur humeur farouche et barbare.” Hennepin, 181.

native women that led writers on New France to reflect disapprovingly on their European counterparts, but “the love of Indian mothers for their children,” a love that exemplified not only conformity with a literate ideal of motherhood, but was even representative of the natives’ “desire for their spiritual advancement.”<sup>143</sup>

Nursing opened up an otherwise unmatched opportunity to comment on the deficiencies of European women and to participate in a medico-philosophical discussion that largely condemned wet-nursing on a moral basis. Claude d’Abbeville, for example, employed the arguments of his contemporaries as well as his observations of the Tupinamba native of Brazil to condemn the distinctly European practice. He argues that “nurses do not love the children of others except with an assumed love and for a mercenary rent” identifying nursing as a central part of the maternal bond.<sup>144</sup> Drawing upon an evolving literate construction of ideal motherhood that made maternal breastfeeding of central symbolic importance, maternal love, or rather a particular expression of maternal love, is set as the essential flaw in European womanhood. Native women serve as a convenient foil to the excesses of “unnatural” and overcivilized European mothers.

The implicit closeness of savage women to nature, helped solidify the concept of nursing as an expression of “natural” motherhood. It is repeatedly made clear that French women, in their failure to nurse, not only ignored divine injunction, but violated the demands of nature itself. Lescarbot pointed to the love of native women for their children as evidence that nursing was the very source of maternal love. “Savage women have

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<sup>143</sup> Abbeville explicitly makes this connection in his very chapter heading dedicated to the subject: “*Amour des meres Indiennes envers leurs enfans, & le desir de leur advancement spiritual,*” 92-3.

<sup>144</sup> “*Car les nourrices n’aiment les enfans d’autrui que d’un amour suppose et pour un loyer mercenaire, mais les mères aiment par une grande amitié, et une grande affection naturelle.*” Abbeville, 180.

more love than that towards their little ones,” he remarks, “because no others than they nurse them.” Not only that, but, even in their savage state, native women still obeyed the demands “the law which Nature has grafted in the hearts of all animals (excepting debauched women), to care for them.”<sup>145</sup> Even if the heathen piety of the ideal mother-type placed her only a little below the angels, the colonial hierarchy still conveniently placed her only a little above the animals. The implicit association between native women, nature, and love of children, reinforces the place of nature as the ultimate source of prescriptive motherhood among early modern moralists. Where moralists drew analogies from animal life to confirm the necessity of maternal nursing, writers in New France invoked the savagery of native peoples as an exoticized moral counterpoint to the failures of “civilized” women. The “general simplicity” and “tranquility” of life so often idealized in the noble savage canon here not only bolsters literate preconceptions of maternalism, but highlights the dangers of overcivilization.<sup>146</sup>

This danger is continually associated with the fact that European women purportedly sacrificed their own children to satisfy the temptations of libertine society. Even the “*sauvagesses*”—both their gender and their barbarity being clearly marked—were exalted for their maternal purity, symbolized in the fact that they nursed their own children, rather than following the French custom of hiring out a wet nurse. In stark contrast to the vision of native motherhood conjured by writers on New France, French mothers were inextricably associated with the artificial manners, immoderate negligence, and sexual self-indulgence of aristocratic society. By failing as mothers, Lescarbot claims, they cruelly endanger their own brood for the sake of vain pleasure, even risking

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<sup>145</sup> Lescarbot, 658.

<sup>146</sup> Labat, 545.

the degeneracy of the “race” by their actions.<sup>147</sup> The literary trope of the mother-type thus not only moralized, but naturalized mothering.



**Figure 4: “La Femme Sauvage” and “La Brésilienne.”** Sixteenth-century depictions of nude “savage” women with children in tow, one a representation of “the savage women of North Africa” and the other, “the costume of the women of Brazil.” This volume depicts “type” images of men and women from different regions of France and from around the world, in characteristic costume. Strikingly, no depiction of European women from the same volume features women with their children, suggesting a certain association between the savage state broadly and attachment to and care for children. From François Deserps, *Illustrations de Recueil de la diversité des habits qui sont de présent usage tant es pays d’Europe, Asie, Afrique et isles sauvages* (Paris: R. Breton, 1567), 50, 56.

Sexuality in particular elicited harsh condemnation against French mothers.

Referencing European medical custom that mandated sexual abstinence during lactation, as intercourse was thought to corrupt the milk, Henri Justel directly alludes to the sexual self-indulgence of non-nursing European mothers, while praising the fact that, “The

<sup>147</sup> Lescarbot, 657.



women observe the same law of chastity the whole time that they nurse their infants. Oh beautiful custom! One would need the grace of God to be able to preach this doctrine to the women of Europe, so as to be heard.”<sup>148</sup> The implication, that European women put their children out to nurse in order to satisfy the demands of lust, was a common one. Lescarbot condemned fashionable French women for making their breasts objects of sexual desire, in fitting with the distinctly Renaissance aesthetic of the classical breast, rather than following the inclinations of nature.<sup>149</sup> Here again, the moral anxieties expressed by pedagogical, theological, and medical writers emerge, concerning the menace of promiscuous wet nurses and mothers who shirked familial responsibility. In contrasting the love native women show their children through nursing them, in comparison to the defects of mothers who followed European nursing practices, love here becomes an issue of social stability akin to that evoked in the literary and prescriptive productions of Old France.

The influence of early modern medical discourse on literate interpretations of Native American child-rearing custom is especially apparent. Mirroring contemporary medical injunction that linked intercourse with the corruption of the milk, native women were consistently praised for their chastity during lactation. Abbeville, much like Lescarbot, waxes moralistic on this point, observing of the Tupinamba, “They take care not to do like many mothers here, who scarcely wait until the birth of their children to put them out to nurse,” presumably to satisfy their own lustful demands. Not only that, but

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<sup>148</sup> “*Quand une femme est grosse et qu’elle sen remuer son enfant, elle s’abstient de la compagnie des homes jusqu’à son accouchement: les femmes observant la même loi de chasteté tout le temps qu’elles donnent le tétin à leurs enfants. Belle coutume! On aurait bonne grâce de vouloir prêcher cette doctrine aux femmes de l’Europe, comme on en serait écouté.*” Justel, 73; Jacqueline T. Miller, “Mother Tongues: Language and Lactation in Early Modern Literature” *English Literary Renaissance* 27(1997): 190; David I. Kertzer, Marzio Barbagli, eds., *The History of the European Family: Family Life in Early Modern Times, 1500-1789*, (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 193.

<sup>149</sup> Lescarbot, 657.

the practice would have seemed repulsive to, “the Savage women [who] would not want to imitate this for anything in the world, wanting their children to be nursed with their own milk.”<sup>150</sup> Though native women conformed to medical custom regarding sexual abstinence during lactation, their crowning praise came from obeying the demands of maternal duty with the utmost showing of selfless love. Even the famed eighteenth-century Jesuit priest to Québec, Charlevoix, linked this same observation to a supreme expression of maternal love, writing, “While a woman is pregnant or nursing—and they nurse ordinarily for three years—their husbands do not approach them at all. Nothing could be more laudable than this custom, if each remains loyal to the other.”<sup>151</sup> This observation alone led him to declare, “One cannot imagine the care, in that country, that mothers show their children while they are in the cradle.”<sup>152</sup>

Interestingly, even where French women are admitted to have affection for their children, their love is still ranked less than that exhibited by the nursing mother-type embodied in native motherhood. Though French mothers are uncompromisingly characterized as debauched, extravagant, and selfish for failing to offer the maternal breast to their infants, the affections they do afford their children are still inextricably associated with the artificiality and decadence of aristocratic life. Du Tertre even claimed that “savage women are known to mock our French women” for spoiling so many of their children, stifling them with affection where elsewhere they are criticized for being cruel

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<sup>150</sup> Abbeville, 281.

<sup>151</sup> “Encore pendant qu’une Femme est enceinte ou nourrice, et elles nourrissent pour l’ordinaire trois ans, leurs Maries ne les approchent point. Rien ne serait plus louable que cette coûtume, si l’un et l’autre se gardaient alors la fidélité, qu’ils se doivent.” Pierre De Charlevoix, *Journal d’un voyage fait par ordre du roi dans l’Amérique septentrionale*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1744), 288.

<sup>152</sup> “Il ne se peut rien imaginer au de-là du soin, que les Meres prennent de leurs Enfants, tandis qu’ils font au Berceau.” *Ibid.*

and unloving.<sup>153</sup> Seemingly, where French women were neglectful in their natural duty, they were excessive in their other expressions of affection, tainted by the excesses of “civilized” life. This, du Tertre directly ascribed to “the virtuousness of the heathen caribs above the immoral life of the Europeans.”<sup>154</sup> The affection shown by Native American women for their children, however, is attributed to a “natural” source, ultimately embodied in the care with which they nursed their infants. Echoing du Tertre, Jean-Baptiste Labat, a later arrival to the French Caribbean, even had to qualify his assertion that, “[Native] mothers love their children with an extreme passion,” adding that “whatever they do not show in marks of their affection or by their caresses, as do European women,” they still exceeded because, “they nurse their children as long as they can, and wean them only out of necessity.”<sup>155</sup>

### A Pre-Lapsarian Eve

Writers in New France also referenced classical authority and invoked a purer, classical past in support of the exotic maternal ideal. Appeals to the classical past may seem out of place in descriptions of New France and its unfamiliar peoples. However, the association between the ancient past and the seemingly primitive lifestyle of Native Americans was clear in the minds of French colonial writers, who often framed their exploits in language that likened native life to the classical golden age. Montaigne

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<sup>153</sup> “*Aussi les femmes Sauvages se sçavent fort bien moquer de nos Françaises, qui dorlotent tant leurs enfants.*” Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles habitées par les François*. Vol. 2. (Paris, 1667), 376.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> “*Les meres aiment leurs enfants avec une extrême passion, at quoiqu’elles ne leur donnent pas des marques de leur affection par des caresses, comme font les Européens, leur tendresse n’en est pas moins réele, moins solide, et moins constante. Elles allaitent leurs enfants aussi longtemps qu’elles le peuvent, et ne les sevrant que par nécessité.*” Jean-Baptiste Labat and Étienne Renaud Desmarchais, *Voyage du Chevalier des Marchais en Guinée, isles voisines, et à Cayenne: fait en 1725, 1726 et 1727*, vol. 1 (Paris: Saugrain, 1730), originally published, 1722.

himself commented that the idyllic lives of the Tupinamba of Brazil, as described by Jean de Léry, even exceeded “all the pictures in which poets have idealized the golden age and all their inventions in imagining a happy state of man.”<sup>156</sup>

Like other contemporary humanists, who drew their initial conception of natural motherhood from the classical world, writers were quick to draw similar parallels to classical *exempla* that contextualized native life within a classical past. Similarly, when confronted with the question of native maternity, they drew upon classical sources that confirmed the dangers of wet-nursing and the risk of corrupted virtue that came with the milk. Much as Tacitus contrasted a vision of pure motherhood among the Gauls with the artificiality of Roman aristocratic society, Claude d’Abbeville digresses into the same moralizing pattern established by his more literary contemporaries, when he quotes the authority of “the Emperor Marcus Aurelius” in favor of the maternal breast. Some strikingly familiar arguments are regurgitated in his colonial account, digressing into the same moralizing pattern established by his more literary contemporaries:

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius said that women must feed and nurse their children so that they may be complete, and not flawed, mothers, for a woman is half a mother for having given birth, and half for the feeding of her offspring. Thus the mother can only call herself mother entirely when she has given birth and fed the child from her own breast, because nurses do not love the children of others except with an assumed love and for a mercenary rent. But mothers love them because of a great friendship and a great natural affection.<sup>157</sup>

Once again, rather than focusing on the reality of Native American child-rearing custom, Abbeville uses the space of his narrative to digress into a tirade on the obligations of motherhood, indistinguishable from any that frequently appeared in works

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<sup>156</sup> Montaigne, 113.

<sup>157</sup> “L’Empereur Marc-Aurèle dit que les femmes doivent nourrir et allaiter leurs enfants, afin qu’elles soient mères entières, et non imparfaites: Car la femme est moitié mère pour enfanter, et moitié pour la nourriture de son fruit, de manière que la femme se peut appeler mère entière, lorsqu’elle a enfanté et nourri son enfant de ses propres mamelles. Car les nourrices n’aiment les enfants d’autrui que d’un amour suppose et pour un loyer mercenaire, mais les mères aiment par une grande amitié, et une grande affection naturelle.” Abbeville, 180.

by physicians and moralists. Not only is the stark duality between “complete” and “flawed” motherhood remarkably elaborate for what is ostensibly a book of travels, but the influence of classical authority is used anachronistically to glorify the example of devoted and loving mothers among the Tupinamba of Brazil. Once again, Abbeville makes clear the dual duty of female reproduction embodied in the act of breastfeeding, casting maternal nursing as the supreme expression of motherly love, implying that French women have fallen miserably short of this ideal.

Like other literary sources that pointed to classical authority for examples of the physiological and psychological dangers of wet-nursing, Christian LeClerq saw in the native women of Québec an ideal alternative to the classical condemnation of wet-nursing. Admirably, he observes, “it is unheard of that they put [their infants] out to nurse, unable to resolve themselves to give to others the fruits of their womb.” At the other extreme, he points out the destructive “insensitivity of those mothers who abandon their little innocents to the care of nurses, from which they suck quite often corruption with the milk,” a choice whose consequences he illustrates at length in the dark legends that surrounded the upbringing of Alexander the Great and Caligula.

The former, according to the report of St. Clement of Alexandria, knocked back drink like an animal, because his mother was subject to wine: the latter, following the testimony of history, breathed nothing but blood and carnage...because his nurse, to accustom him to cruelty and inspire a barbaric mood in him, reddened the tips of her breasts with her own blood.<sup>158</sup>

Observations like this that likened the cruelty of wet-nursing French mothers to the legends of Caligula’s cruelty are virtually indistinguishable from those proposed by

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<sup>158</sup> “...Car il est inouï qu’elles les mettent en nourrice, ne pouvant se résoudre de donner aux autres les fruits de leurs entrailles ; blâmant par cette conduite, l’insensibilité de ces mères qui abandonnent ces petits innocens aux soins des nourrices, dont ils sucent assez souvent la corruption avec le lait : comme l’expérience malheureuse l’a fait assez voir dans la conduite d’Alexandre le Grand, et de l’Empereur Caligula ; dont le premier, au rapport de saint Clement Alexandrin, s’envoyait comme une bête, parce que sa mere étoit sujette au vin : le second, suivant le témoignage de l’Histoire, ne respiroit que le sang et le carnage...parce que sa nourrice, pour l’accoutumer à la cruauté et luy inspirer une humeur barbare, rougissoit avec son sang le bout de ses mamelles.” LecLerq, 49-50.

other moralistic authors that saw confirmation for natural motherhood in borrowings from Antiquity. Here, LeClerq regurgitates contemporary medical discourse that figured nursing as a means of transmitting virtue, only mentioning in passing the remarkable “tenderness and friendship that fathers and mothers have for their children,” and only as a part of a negative comparison with European women.<sup>159</sup> Where writers on early modern France equally emphasized the “*lien affectif*” in their presentation of proper motherly virtue, the digressions of travel writers into classical example took on a certain urgency, even motivated by overtones of racial degeneration.

Comparisons with a Gallic past also figured prominently in moralistic digressions on native maternity.<sup>160</sup> Numerous travel writers made explicit comparisons between primitive life in America and that of the Gallic past of France. In fact, much of the language employed by Lescarbot in admiration of the women of the Gallic past he derived from Tacitus, who praised the people of Germania for the fact that “every mother feeds her child at the breast and does not depute the task to maids and nurses,” criticizing the use of wet nurses among the Roman aristocracy.<sup>161</sup> The construction of an idealized and exotic maternity as a form of self-critical discourse blurs the limits between selfhood and otherness, especially as configured in an idealized, Gallic past when “every mother suckled her own babes,”<sup>162</sup> seemingly recreated in French America. Where once, in Lescarbot’s nostalgic rendition of the past, both women and men regarded the law of nature in the love of their children, France had since lapsed into moral degeneracy

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>160</sup> Belmessous, 21.

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Houston McNeel, *Paul as Infant and Nursing Mother* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 73. From Cornelius Tacitus, *Dialogus de oratoribus*, 28. Cornelius Tacitus, *Agricola and Germania* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 51.

<sup>162</sup> Tacitus, 71.

brought about by a form of female vice that would deprive even tender infants of the spiritual nourishment so central to their developing character. For Lescarbot and his contemporaries, primitive maternity was represented as the foil of decadent, modern France and was constructed as a central part of the national myth-making employed by humanist historiographers, and used by Lescarbot to link “*l’ancienne Gaul*” to New France. Through women, his critique thus extends to encompass the degeneracy of French society broadly, who in their idleness and excess had forgotten the love of their own children and the manly qualities of their ancestors the Gauls.<sup>163</sup> In this way, the women of New France proved particularly suitable vessels in which to locate this vision of idealized maternal love: a veritable *mère entière*, lost somewhere in the classical past, but again rediscovered in America.

#### **“Distorted, Infirm and Degenerate Offspring”**

Despite the laudatory passages of Lescarbot, Abbeville, and de Rochefort, associating native maternity with a purer Gallic past, the subject of maternal love and breastfeeding practices—like nudity—often led otherwise meticulous ethnographers to look not only backward, but homeward. Needless to say, their view was hardly an optimistic one. When examined within a context located in France proper, the cultural significance of the lactating mother-type in America is apparent.

However, by transposing a classical European maternal ideal onto exotic subjects, a number of anxieties about the danger of overcivilization and public morality are expressed. Though the puzzling invective contained in the narratives of French colonialists drew upon an already existing discourse on mothering, exoticized motherhood evoked an even wider range of anxieties about the nature of civilization

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<sup>163</sup> Lescarbot, 657.

itself. As the work of recent historians examining the culture of the breast has shown, literate opposition to wet-nursing was often divorced from social reality, and rooted firmly in an idealism that identified bad mothering as a symptom of a decadent, aristocratic culture. The exotic space in which writers concocted the ideal native mother was equally metaphorical. Native maternity, specifically located in the maternal breast, provided a convenient foil to the degeneracy of noble character broadly. Much as Pierre Boaistreau criticized the barbarity of civilized ladies who would rather hold their delicate lap dogs than their own babies, colonial literature juxtaposed the unloving actions of French women with the supposed “barbarity” of native women.<sup>164</sup>

In this way, the location of the maternal ideal in the corporeal and in the exotic was often served to bolster not only an evolving discourse on maternal duty maintained simultaneously in Old Europe, but the racialized arguments proposed by certain writers, who personified the moral failure of Old France in a naturalized maternal ideal. Nursing, so fundamentally connected to the transmission of character and the spiritual essence of the mother linked the moral degeneracy of France directly to women, in a way much akin to Rousseau’s projected European “desert.” When women failed to fulfill their “natural” role, the collective morality of civilization is at risk. Invoking a contemporary understanding of the breast-milk in connection with virtue, Lescarbot argued that wet-nursing had degenerated the virtuous character of the nobility, who sucked from their nurses “corruption and bad nature,” resulting in “the distorted, infirm and degenerate offspring from the right stock whose name they bear.”<sup>165</sup> The devotional aspect of lactation only supported a negative reflection on appropriate mothering practices in

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<sup>164</sup> Boaistreau, 26.

<sup>165</sup> Lescarbot, 657.



connection with public virtue. Not only was the, “The first task of women...the work of generation,” but, referencing Saint Paul, Lescarbot reminds his French readers of the immense power that women had over the souls of their infants. “Women will be saved by the bearing of children,” but, more importantly, by their nourishment, both literal and spiritual: “that is to say, if she instructs with such strength that they recognize the piety of their mother by the *bonne nourriture* of the children.”<sup>166</sup> The dual duties of the *mère entière* are here envisioned as not only a sentimental idealization, but also the very source of French moral laxity. Far from a culturally sensitive attempt to understand native difference, Lescarbot and his colonial compatriots used an idealized and geographically generalized imagining of native life as a way to address particular French social anxieties, and to reinforce a prevailing ideology of gender that emphasized maternal affection and made breastfeeding of central importance in reproduction.

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<sup>166</sup> “*Le premier exercice de la femme que de travailler à la generation, qui est un œuvre si beau et si meritoire, que le grand Apotre Paul pour les consoler de la peine qu’elles ont en ce travail, a dit, que la femme sera sauvée par la generation des enfants, s’ils demeurent en foy et dilection et sanctification, avec sobriété, c’est à dire, si elle les instruit en telle forte qu’on reconnoisse la pieté de la mere par la bonne nourriture des enfants.*” Lescarbot, 782.

## CONCLUSION

The trope of the idealized, primitive mother in early modern French travel literature invites a number of questions about how writers envisioned not only a specific ideology of maternal duty, but the relative moral position of civilization. Why, when colonizers in a variety of contexts looked on Native American cultures, did they choose breastfeeding as a measure of superior moral character, even over and above that of French women? On the other side of the globe, far removed from the everyday business of birthing and nursing at home, why did male travel writers think it necessary to reflect on the nature of motherhood in France?

It was more than mere unfamiliarity with native childrearing custom that entangled French writers in discussions on good and bad parenting, the evils of wet nurses, and the moral value of breast milk. Writers on the French New World prioritized descriptions of maternal affection and maternal nursing, just as they were prioritized in contemporary anxieties about reproduction, gender, and morality in early modern France. The *mère entière*, configured in primitive America, was a logical continuation to a long-standing literate tradition that located proper maternal duty in the breast. By focusing on the benign “otherness” of native mothers, commentators effectively moralized the “otherness” of female vice at home, linking poor mothering to the general moral degeneracy of civilized society.

Physicians, moralists, and colonialists all concurred in their assessment of nursing as the central aspect of proper maternal duty and affection. Concern for the “natural” expression of maternal love engaged the literate world of early modern France in a moral debate that transcended culture and geography. French travel writers chose to focus on maternal breastfeeding in their observations of native life not only because it contrasted dramatically with social reality of early modern France, but as a result of certain literate preconceptions about proper gendered behavior. Sentimental representations of native motherhood cofunctioned with a medico-philosophical discourse that naturalized maternal breastfeeding and condemned hiring out the labor of reproduction.

The practice of wet-nursing and the intense ethical debate that surrounded it was a peculiarity of pre-modern France. However, science, morality, and culture continue to shape the politics of the maternal breast in a debate that has not ceased since early modern times: how should mothers do mothering? Historical studies like this one invite a critical examination of agency in cultural constructions of ideal motherhood, revealing how even seemingly disparate discourses may work within one another to delimit the proper expression of motherhood.

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