

SORCERY, SERPENTS, SURROGATES, AND STATUES:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUCKLING IN SHAKESPEARE

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

English

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY


May, 2004

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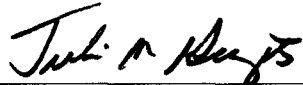
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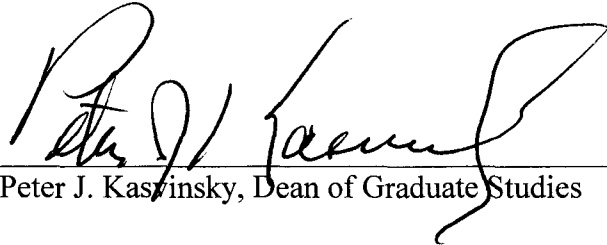
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ABSTRACT

Key dramatic scenes involving images of breastfeeding occur within literary masterpieces from Shakespeare's time to the present. This paper explores the manner in which the dramatic effect of these scenes in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Winter's Tale* is heightened by breastfeeding imagery juxtaposed against images of murder, suicide, being killed in action, and being frozen in time. Shakespeare's attitude toward maternal nursery is argued. In addition, the level of sophistication in Shakespeare's use of breastfeeding imagery over time is analyzed.

Many have written on the use of breastfeeding imagery utilizing such approaches as new historicist, feminist, and psychoanalytic in their critiques. Anthropological studies of what could/should be considered normal breastfeeding and child-rearing behavior point to the cultural influence of humans on this biological function. Culturally based interference occurs in defining what is/is not considered normal human behavior. Therefore, an understanding of biological and cultural beliefs concerning the breast and its function during the time in which they were written is necessary to fully appreciate major literary works.

I. SETTING THE STAGE

The alarm blared from my radio; it was time to face another day. I groped for my eyeglasses as the approach of consciousness slowly brought into focus the familiar objects around me. I had fallen asleep while reading Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; the still open five-inch thick *Norton Shakespeare* had served as my pillow. In spite of the comfy headrest, I eventually realized I had been listening to the radio even while asleep. The talk radio callers' comments and opinions were being solicited on the recently introduced bill to allow public breastfeeding in the State of Ohio. Expressed opinions varied widely. One woman described breastfeeding as disgusting and related stories of the old days when "ignorant" immigrant women would breastfeed their babies on trolley cars. One older man reported that seeing a woman's exposed breast during breastfeeding would be arousing or erotic. He claimed that if this act were legal, some women would not be discreet about the process, but instead, expose their breasts to the masses. Those callers who identified themselves as older opposed the proposed law, offering an alternative solution of banishing breastfeeding to public restrooms. Most younger men and women, however, weighed in with a positive reaction, detailing the process as natural. They suggested that those who proposed bathroom breastfeeding should dine in public restrooms themselves. It became obvious very quickly that this audience was extremely divided in its acceptance and practice of breastfeeding or maternal nursery.

During the confusion of those pre-caffeinated minutes, I imagined the various reactions of that same audience to *The Winter's Tale*, with all of its nursing imagery. When Leontes tells Hermione, for example, "I am glad you did not nurse him," I could

see part of that radio audience thinking, “Right on!” I could also imagine the reaction of the “natural” crew thinking how bizarre this same line might sound.

To breastfeed or not to breastfeed—that is the question many modern mothers face. Since the artificial nipple was invented in the 1830s, artificial formula has been until very recently extensively marketed as the optimum food for infants. The scientific Zeitgeist driving ideas and behaviors after World War II championed the bottle-feeding of infants in American society. What could be more scientific than the weighing and measuring of infant food as an indicator of health? Certainly not the old-fashioned method of putting baby to the breast. Formula manufacturers assured the medical profession that they had improved on “nature” by cooking up a superior, man-made product that could be delivered by prescription and dispensed according to a tightly regulated schedule. After all, how could the doctors control the diet of their patients if the method of delivery didn’t allow for objective scientific analysis? The medical profession swallowed the story—breastfeeding soon fell out of fashion. Breasts, however, did not. Stripped of their natural function—mammary glands provide milk for the young, hence the classification mammals—breasts became only erotic marketing material.

Public breastfeeding is not the only controversial issue about infant feeding in the twenty-first century. Society still struggles with the definition of breastfeeding and the role women play in the process—are they tied down in a mind-numbing, body-robbing, animalistic ritual, or are they tied to an enlightening, healthy, nurturing function of humanity? Modern day pro-nursing advocates anchor their arguments in science; it is now “clinically proven” that breastfeeding is best for mother and baby. Even the marketing of artificial feeding products is controlled: television commercials for infant

formula must carry the disclaimer that breastfeeding is the optimal method of infant feeding. In the latter half of the twentieth century and the infancy of the twenty-first, many educated, upper and middle class women, with greater access to both the best educational and medical resources, have chosen and sometimes even fought to breastfeed their babies. Political pressure to increase breastfeeding rates in lower socioeconomic classes is also prevalent; in spite of all the new-fangled technology that proves that breastfeeding is the optimal way to feed baby, mothers from the lower socio-economic classes still prefer bottle to breast. Federal subsistence programs targeting women, infants, and children have struggled to increase the breastfeeding rate of clients. While the same types of persuasive arguments were being aimed at women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rhetoric, in lieu of scientific data and feminist paradigms, was loaded with religious arguments.

The current infant feeding controversy parallels the infant feeding controversy of the Early Modern Period in many ways. In “Biocultural Perspectives on Breastfeeding” Patricia Stuart-Macadam, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, asserts that biology and culture are closely related and have reciprocal effects on each other. Most important, the ability to change behavior in response to environmental challenges, rather than wait for some evolutionary mutation, is the greatest strength of being human. She points to breastfeeding as an apparent example: “Breastfeeding is the ultimate biocultural phenomenon; in humans breastfeeding is not only a biological process but also a culturally determined behavior” (7). Valerie Fildes, considered “the source” for information about breastfeeding and wet nursing from antiquity to the present by many, thoroughly discusses every facet of infant feeding throughout the ages in

Breasts, Bottles, and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding (1986) and *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (1988). She has researched many medical, literary, artistic, and cultural references to offer a comprehensive explanation of varying practices in breastfeeding. She approaches her subject as a scientist; she was a nurse before earning her doctorate in biology. Her work has the aura of objectivity. Fildes contends that while “the impression gained over years of study is that the great majority of British infants were breastfed at home by their mothers,” this behavior was not practiced by the wealthy in the Early Modern Period; “possibly a substantial number” of “wives of the aristocracy, gentry, wealthy merchants, wealthy farmers, scholars, lawyers, physicians, and some clergymen” employed wet-nurses— other women to breastfeed or suckle their infants. The evidence suggests that between physicians, philosophers, and theologians, “the subject of ‘maternal breastfeeding versus wet-nursing’ received more attention in all types of literature than did other aspects of infant nutrition” (*Breasts* 98-99).

Knowledge of the infant feeding practices and the underlying cultural assumptions in both the Early Modern Period and modern society is necessary to determine the significance of the numerous instances of nursing images present in Shakespeare’s plays. In *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*, Gail Kern Paster discusses the amount of attention paid to breast imagery in Elizabethan literature and drama:

I want above all to insist that what may seem a disproportionate emphasis on the properties of the maternal breast is grounded in, if not determined by, physical and material conditions of a kind twentieth-century Anglo-Americans may find hard to conceptualize—particularly the

irreplaceability of breast milk, hence of lactating breasts, in a preindustrial age. (219)

In some lesser-developed modern cultures, there remain concerns about the irreplaceability of breast milk similar to those prevalent throughout the Early Modern Period. The World Health Organization recognizes the vital importance of breastfeeding in contemporary societies that do not have the same availability of medical resources and standards of hygiene that industrial and post-industrial societies take for granted. Such concerns, however, are not as dramatically portrayed as those in the Renaissance.

A culturally determined behavior is also a culturally referenced behavior, vis-à-vis the art imitates life paradigm. Pivotal scenes including nursing imagery are present in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, and *The Winter's Tale*, as well as in many more of Shakespeare's plays and other dramatic works of the period. Noting that the imagery of breastfeeding is prevalent or referred to in some of the most crucial scenes, I believe that an examination of the use of that imagery may enhance or color the understanding of those scenes. In short, I would like to examine the imagery from a new historicist perspective. It is my contention that this imagery is intended to heighten the dramatic effect of the scenes in which they occur, based on the prevailing Renaissance attitudes and knowledge of infant feeding and rearing practices. Secondarily and psychoanalytically, Shakespeare's attitude toward suckling may be revealed by close examination of his use of imagery.

II. SAUCY SORCERY

The auditorium was darkened and hushed for the beginning of *Macbeth* as I stumbled into my seat. Primed by the cadence of the iambic pentameter, my anticipation grew as Lady Macbeth prepared to give Macbeth his murderous marching orders. Just when she launched into her speech, the audience tittered and guffawed. I subsequently couldn't hear a word she uttered.

After my initial disappointment (to put it politely), I realized that several high schools were represented in the audience. As soon as Lady Macbeth said "given suck," the high school students reacted by acting out. Unlike the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when "suck" and "nurse" meant the difference between life and death, for these modern students "suck" has only sexual connotation and "nurse" is what one in the medical field does. While the discussion may be blaring from the radio, it is from an AM station early in the AM, and high school students are definitely not on the same frequency or timetable. Many have never seen a baby put to the breast and—thanks to *Victoria's Secret* and *Playboy*—many in the twenty-first century believe the purpose of breasts is sex and sales: erotic economics and/or economic eroticism.

A sixteenth or seventeenth-century English audience would not have reacted in the same fashion, whether young or old: the method of infant feeding was a matter of life or death for the baby. According to Merry E. Weisner in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, women then had three choices when it came to feeding their infants. They could suckle them themselves, hire a wet nurse, or bring the baby up by hand, sometimes referred to as dry-nursing (letting the baby suck gruel or pap off a rag) (72).

Fildes claims that wet-nursing was introduced to Britain during the Roman invasion, as it was a well-established custom of the ancient Greeks and Romans due to the availability of slaves. The great majority of British women in the Early Modern Period probably breast-fed their own infants, with the exception of the women in the upper strata of society. Breast-feeding was a hot topic during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as the Puritans attempted to influence mothers to feed their own infants (*Breasts* 98). In the class of women to which Lady Macbeth belonged, it was customary for infants to be given to another woman to be breastfed. This wet-nursing was arranged in one of two ways according to Fildes: in very wealthy and aristocratic families, the nurse was brought into the family's dwelling to live; in other instances, the infant was sent out to another family, sometimes for up to three years (*Wet Nursing* 79). Lady Macbeth's claim of nursing an infant is then more remarkable for being an uncommon childrearing activity for her class and status.

The concept that mothers who nursed infants developed tender feelings toward them was common enough to be recorded in cultural representations of the day: Patricia Crawford in "The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England" points to "divines" who combine "practical observations" with biblical arguments to urge women to breastfeed their own infants using tender touch rhetoric. She cites William Gouge, a Protestant who argued for maternal nursery in his popular treatise, *Of Domesticall Duties*: "'Commonly such children as are nursed by their mothers prosper best,' observed Gouge. 'Mothers are most tender over them, and cannot indure to let them cry out, without taking them up and stilling them'" (8). Gouge's "most tender" mothers parallel Lady Macbeth's stated feelings of tenderness toward an infant

when “given suck.”

Another benefit to maternal breast-feeding, one that Lawrence Stone suggests in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* may have improved infant mortality and the growth of affect in the eighteenth century, is that it promoted mother-child bonding. Stone explains, “As Plutarch had pointed out in his *Moralia* centuries before, breast-feeding by the mother stimulates maternal affection. It also gives the child” he continues, “a greater sense of security and confidence about the world, and increases its attachment to its mother” (431). Crawford, in “‘The Sucking Child’: Adult Attitudes to Child Care in the First Year of Life in Seventeenth-Century England,” states that “contemporary authors used the metaphor of the mother-child bond for the closest human bond” (41). Evidence that this affection occurred in the seventeenth century is evident in culturally relevant documents and artifacts. Several families increased inheritances for those children who were maternally breastfed, such as one John Greene, an Essex lawyer, who left the one daughter who was nursed an extra one hundred pounds in his will, according to Fildes (*Breasts* 100). Histories of nursing were even inscribed on tombstones: the inscription on the Countess of Manchester’s gravestone (died 1658), ended with “7 of them [out of eight children] shee nvr sed with her owne breasts” followed by “Her children shall rise up & call her blessed” (Fildes, *Breasts* 101).

Through observation, sixteenth and seventeenth-century persons recognized the close relationship that breast-feeding builds between the mother and child, or nursing dyad. The mother-child bond was cited by sixteenth-century writers and preachers who urged mothers to breast-feed and the relationship received even greater emphasis in the seventeenth century: “The principle consequence of non-suckling was thought to be the

lack of the mother-child bond” (Fildes, *Breasts* 114). It is arguable that certain sayings, like one Lady Macbeth uses, “yet, so I fear thy nature, / It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness” (1.5.14–15), flow from the common perception of mammals (both man and beast) that nursed and cared for their young with great affection. “The biological bond between a mother and her child was understood to be a natural bond,” writes Crawford. Furthermore, Crawford cites John Dod and Robert Cleaver (in 1606), observing that a mother should breast-feed her own infant because ““this is so naturall a thing that euen the beasts will not omit it”” (“Construction” 11). A literary example of both the strength of the bond and the rarity of aristocrats suckling their own can be found in *The White Devil* by John Webster. When the young Giovanni laments his mother’s death, he states:

I have often heard her say she gave me suck,
 And it should seem by that she dearly loved me,
 Since princes seldom do it. (3.2.337–39)

Sometimes the loving bond that the term “sucking” conjured was used to juxtapose a hideous act of inhumanity. In *The White Devil*, for instance, Flamineo’s brother, Marcello, speaks to their mother about a crucifix after he and Flamineo argue themselves into a duel. Marcello addresses Cornelia: “I have heard you say, giving my brother suck / He took the crucifix between his hands, / And broke a limb off” (5.1.11–13). Flamineo enters while they speak and runs his brother through with his own weapon. Picture that little bundle of innocence, gently slurping and cooing at the breast, smiling and sucking simultaneously, and then snap, a definite no-no, an outright omen of evil occurs. Later in the same play, when Lodovico stabs Vittoria, she remarks:

‘Twas a manly blow;

The next thou giv'st, murder some sucking infant;
 And then thou will be famous. (5.6.235–37)

But it wouldn't be the first time that Renaissance audiences heard that scenario. And these lines are definitely not as famous as their dramatic predecessors. Shakespeare used the same nursing/evil contrast in *Macbeth*. One of Shakespeare's most dramatic uses of breastfeeding imagery occurs in *Macbeth*—in the scene that causes such titillation in modern high school students—when Lady Macbeth is urging her husband to perform regicide as he had previously promised. The choice of images Shakespeare uses to convey Lady Macbeth's determination that the deed be done shows the ferocity of her will. After Lady Macbeth reminds Macbeth that he is a *man*, she moves into this woman-centered rhetoric:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
 And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
 As you have done to this. (1.7.54–59)

Lady Macbeth prefaces the horrible act of infanticide with the image of one of the most loving pictures of the mother-child bond. In fact, the first two lines, “I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me,” when separated from the remainder of Lady Macbeth's speech, contain nothing sinister; on the contrary, they are full of positive words and images that would be very familiar to Renaissance audiences: “tender,” “love,” “babe,” “milks.”

Stone describes the nursing dyad's or mother-child link as psychological; modern day science has been able to show that it also physiological. Modern day researchers have pinpoint proof of the increase of certain hormones in the lactating mother during breastfeeding that produce calming, loving effects, the increased brain stimulus of the infant through touch, and the synchronization of sleep/wake schedules. Two hormones, oxytocin and prolactin, as explained by Stuart-Macadam, are released by the woman's pituitary gland in response to the stimulation of nerves in the nipple by an infant's suck. Prolactin has been termed the "mothering hormone" and "is said to have a relaxing effect on the mother and enhance the desire for mother-infant proximity," while oxytocin has earned the label of the "hormone of love' because of its relationship to orgasm, birth, breastfeeding, and bonding" (8). So Shakespeare, by having Lady Macbeth know how tender it is to suckle a baby, could have been referring to first hand knowledge of the effects of these hormones. Consider William Gouge's plea to seventeenth-century mothers:

How can a mother better expresse her love to her younge babe, then by letting it sucke of her owne breasts? As this is a testimony of love, so it is a means of preferring and increasing love: for daily experience sheweth that mothers love those children best whom they themselves give sucke.

(qtd. in McPherson 85)

Gouge's observations of daily experience closely parallel the modern day scientific claims.

For all his observation of this nursing experience, feminist critics point out that Gouge was still a man and a Protestant preacher in a strongly patriarchal society. One

woman who wrote to others about maternal nursing in the seventeenth century was Elizabeth Clinton. *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* grew out of the personal correspondence of the Countess Dowager Elizabeth and her daughter-in-law Briget, the Countess of Lincoln. Two modern scholars, Marilyn Serraino Luecke and Kathryn Read McPherson, discuss Clinton's work in their recent dissertations. Clinton did not nurse her own eighteen children; she directly addresses women at court, urging them to breastfeed their infants. According to Luecke: "Clinton knew this court intimately and wrote specifically to other noblewomen urging them through learning and conscience to organize their lives around the maternal bond formed while breastfeeding their children" (143). She urges mothers to nurse their own children using a variety of rhetorical strategies, even urging wives to obey God in his dictates to nurse in disobedience of their husbands: "Clinton authorizes women's choices, justifying wifely disobedience in the interests of maternal responsibility, which she privileges" (Luecke 129), because she felt "pricked in hart for [her] undutifulness" (qtd. in McPherson 102).

Because Clinton uses the rhetoric of religion to make her argument, both Luecke and McPherson concentrate on her regret of "undutifulness" of the passage. Clinton, in other words, is distraught over her disobedience to God, her sin, of not nursing her own children, and the sins she therefore caused less fortunate women, forced to wet-nurse for remuneration, who deprived their own infants maternal nursery and time when imposed upon by the women of the upper classes. There is no interpretation of Clinton's heart missing the tenderness of the nursing experience itself. It is totally plausible that relying on religion and obedience to God was a rhetorical strategy, an attempt to gain agency for women usually subservient to their husband's wishes. If Clinton had expressed the desire

for the tender experience of nursing her own infants, she may have left herself open to a charge of selfishness by men. Appealing to the ultimate authority left little room for attack on her personal motivation.

Another explanation for Clinton's choice of argument was that upper class women were frequently shunned or taunted if they chose to breastfeed. Henry Newcome writes in *The Compleat Mother* (1695):

I have observed that those ladies, who contrary to this prevailing custom [of wet nursing] have undertaken the nursing of their own babes, have oft met with unhandsome reflection and bitter taunts from others of the contrary practice . . . A lady that will condescend to be a nurse, though to her own child, is become as unfashionable and ungenteel as a gentlemen that will not drink, swear and be profane (qtd. in Fildes, *Wet-Nursing* 85)

Upper class women had many strikes against them in their reproductive life. That the tightly laced corsets frequently damaged breast tissue as well as underlying structures was just one reason that mothers were unable to breast-feed. Such other factors as a profusely poorer diet and much more frequent pregnancies than those of their country counterparts tended to seriously undermine the health of upper class women (Fildes, *Breasts* 108-110).

Interestingly, the contraceptive effect of breast-feeding was known and is one reason why husbands forbade their wives to breast-feed. The sons must be produced. No matter that physicians pointed out that women who had fewer pregnancies spaced further apart tended to have offspring that lived (lower class women averaged four or five

children per family), thirty pregnancies were not unknown for an upper class woman (Fildes, *Breasts* 108, 110). Pregnancy was also thought to lessen the quality of the milk being produced for the current infant, or, “as Luther put it in the sixteenth century, the child at the breast would have only skim milk since the one in the womb had taken the cream” (Crawford, “Sucking” 30).

Another reason that husbands frequently forbid nursing was that ancient admonition of Galen’s, that copulation would spoil the milk. Herein lies the crux of the Protestant /Catholic disagreement: Catholic women were admonished to send the infant out to nurse in order to satisfy the sexual needs of their husbands. In *Families in Former Times, Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, Jean-Louise Flandrin states that theologians had advocated this solution for centuries and quotes the early eighteenth-century advice of G. Fromageau in his *Dictionnaire des cas de conscience*: a Catholic woman ““*should, if she can, put her child out to nurse*, in order to provide for the frailty of her husband by paying the conjugal due, for fear that he may lapse onto some sin against conjugal purity”” (206). From the early sixteenth century in both England and Germany, strict Protestant texts urged mothers to nurse their own infants. Fildes postulates that the difference in religious teaching could explain the high incidence of wet-nursing in catholic France versus the relatively low incidence in protestant England (*Breasts* 105). Protestant writer William Gouge believed that husbands had quite a bit to do with whether their wives breast-fed their babies. He tried to sway the opinion of wives, but recognized the ultimate decision was that of the husband. In *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*, Susan Dwyer Amussen relates that Gouge organized *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), a popular domestic manual, according to the

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passage from *Ephesians* which delineates the responsibilities of husbands, wives, children, and servants (38–40). Crawford notes that the fate of infants (chances of survival decreased when infants were wet-nursed) was ultimately determined by the father’s legal authority. She cites Gouge’s pronouncements (both Scripturally and practically based) that women should breast-feed their infants, but, if “their husbands insisted upon a wet-nurse, women ‘must be meere patients in suffering the child to be taken away’” (“Sucking” 43).

Fast-forward to modern times and the representations occur—pictures of mothers with children at the breast, faces glowing, eyes gazing straight into the other’s soul. In fact, a famous morning television anchor appeared with nursing infant on the cover of a highly circulated magazine. Using modern technology, the final airbrushing adds a heavenly halo effect, removing the nursing dyad from the banality of bodily functioning and sending them into the celestial stratosphere. Renaissance audiences could visualize the same images sans technology. Juxtapose these pictures with Shakespeare’s imagery: and then, while the infant smiled up at Lady Macbeth, one woman who has experience in one of the strongest, most loving of all situations, who against all aristocratic admonitions chooses to nurse her infant . . . infanticide. Active, physical, deliberate. Plucking the nipple out of the gums and dashing the brains out. Terrifying.

In *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, Janet Adelman discusses maternal malevolence in Shakespeare’s plays as invoking in male characters

a primitive infantile terror derivative from the period when the mother or her surrogate was not seen as a whole and separate person, when she—or

the body-parts through which she was imagined—had the power to make or unmake the world and the self for her child. (4)

I would argue that it is not some infantile terror fantasy per se, but rather the terror of the passage lies in the realization that all parents have the ability to harm or kill their dependent child. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich writes that it is still taboo to admit of murderous anger, especially that of a mother expressed toward her children. She writes of an evening she spent in 1975 with a group of women poets, discussing the murder and decapitation of two children by their severely depressed mother, who had had eight children. Upset by the handling of the woman by the mental health system and the depiction of her by the press, some of the women poets had signed a letter of protest directed to the local newspaper. They spoke of identifying with the depressed mother's anger:

We spoke of our own moments of murderous anger at our children . . . in the sometimes tentative, sometimes rising, sometimes bitterly witty, unrhetorical tones and language of women who had met together over our common work, poetry, and who found another common ground in an unacceptable, but undeniable anger. The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through. (5)

This situation hasn't improved since 1975. Recently, two instances of mothers drowning their children occurred in the small community in which I live. Both mothers were already under the care of various professionals in the mental health system. The first mother drowned both of her three year-old twins; the second, a six year-old girl. The

media instantly flocked to the scenes, cameras clicking as closely and quickly as possible. The informal venting of public opinion expressed vitriolic condemnation of such women. Just as the women poets that Adrienne Rich speaks of, a professional psychologist (female) wrote to the newspaper after the twins' death to remind everyone that this was a horrendous tragedy for the mother as well, and would be even more so if the woman someday recovered her sanity.

I would argue that it is the shock of Lady Macbeth's assertion that she would dash her baby's brains out and the association with the audience's underlying fear or anxiety of performing murderous acts of anger against the helpless, dependent infants that is what is really terrifying, especially because the hypothetical infanticide is preceded by the most loving, nurturing imagery. Perhaps the subconscious can draw on that infantile terror to color in between the lines, but it is the agency of delivering such destruction that causes the conscious to fully recoil from such starkly drawn depictions. Lady Macbeth, of course, could have been even more famous than just a plain old murderer, as she would probably have been judged insane in her time. Crawford reminds us that Michael Macdonald has shown that a seventeenth-century "woman accused of murdering her child had only to show that she had no motive for her action to be judged guilty of insanity in a court of law" ("Sucking" 41).

Or then again Lady Macbeth may have been shown to be a witch, by the very same nursing terminology:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here

And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull

Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
 Stop up th' access and passage to remorse
 That no compunctious visitings of nature
 Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
 Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
 And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers (1.5.38–46)

This is definitely not the milk o' human kindness that Macbeth is too full of just twenty lines before. Adelman points out that there are two readings of “take my milk for gall.” The spirits can come and replace the milk with gall or can feed off the milk as gall. In “‘Born of Woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*,” Adelman elaborates:

In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the culture's fear of maternal nursery— a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witch's milk. (112)

Since infants were not put to any breast immediately after they were born, and then usually only put to the mother's breasts about eight days afterward, they did not receive any of the immunity-laden colostrum, commonly termed first milk. It was mistakenly thought that the first milk, thinner than subsequent milk and more transparent with a slightly yellowish cast, was inferior: it was sometimes referred to as witch's milk (Crawford, “Sucking” 30). Adelman explains that Lady Macbeth is inviting the nurturing of spirits, or familiars, which was the hallmark of witches (even an extra nipple would get you convicted), and proclaims that “Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment,

and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery” (“Born” 112).

Interestingly, in “‘The Speaking Breast’: A Theory of Shakespearean Creativity,” Alan B. Rothenberg psychoanalyzes Shakespeare by examining chains of metaphors that involve child, mother or nurse, and a latent oral rape fantasy. Rothenberg postulates that the word “chest + nut” may be a subconscious reference for nipple. Specifically, in the first witch scene in *Macbeth*, the witch drains the husband “dry as hay” because the wife “munched, and munched, and munched” the chestnuts in her lap and then refused to share with the witch (1.3.3-5). That Lady Macbeth later invites the spirits to nurse from her breasts seems to lend support to Rothenberg’s contention that “chestnut” may be a *double entendre*. A. R. Braunmuller notes that some have defined “munched” as a Scottish word that means “to eat with the gums when toothless” (109). This could be stretched to signify the toothless nursing infant at the breast; it would seem as plausible as eating nuts by gumming them. A closer look at the witch’s revenge on the husband in Act One, scene three, lines fifteen through twenty-four shows descriptions that would fit the nursing or suckling of an infant: the sailor will be drained “dry as hay,” which can refer to the inability to produce milk; he shall not sleep, which is a common occurrence among mothers with newborn babes; he shall “dwindle,” which can refer to the loss of nutrients and fat from the body due to milk production; he shall “peak,” which could relate to the flu-like effects of a breast infection, and he shall “pine,” which could parallel the postpartum depression that many new mothers experience.

Braunmuller explains “drain him” as a reference to the witch acting as a succubus, having demonic sexual intercourse with the sailor (110). Reports, however, of lactating men in Shakespeare’s time were not unknown. Thomas Laqueur argues in *Making Sex*:

Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud that strange or feminine men might lactate according to the conceptual model of sex that was held during the Renaissance: “Men, if they were ‘of a cold, moist, and feminine complexion,’ were quite likely to have milk in their breasts thought an English doctor, a view shared by Joubert. . . .” Antonio Benzo, a thirty-four year old, pale, fat, scarcely bearded man, was reported to have “so much milk in his breasts that he could feed a baby,” according to an Italian commentator (106). The idea that the witch will nurse the sailor dry would have at least been considered possible in the Renaissance. Rothenberg analyzes the witch’s exclamation, “Here I have a pilot’s thumb” as compensation for the wife’s denial of sucking pleasure that is associated with breast-feeding (249). These contentions seem extremely plausible considering Shakespeare’s sublime mastery of language and keen insight of human nature.

So Shakespeare dishes out suckling images in the tender/evil juxtaposition in Lady Macbeth’s infant brain-dashing speech, the please-come-out-whenever-you-are spirits and take-my-milk-for-gall speech, and the *double entendre* munching chestnut and hay-drained sailor imagery. Terrifying and fun, none of the images are seriously complimentary to suckling as a form of infant feeding or mother-child bonding. Shakespeare certainly does not imbue Lady Macbeth with nurturing characteristics and further, invests her with no other sympathetic qualities. Therefore, it can be argued that while it would appear that Shakespeare knew the importance of breastfeeding, by using the images in such a manner, he does not possess a positive regard for maternal nursery.

III. SERPENTINE SUICIDE

I wonder if, as in the production of *Macbeth*, I had stumbled into a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* complete with adolescent audience, there would be guffawing during the climactic scene as Cleopatra suicides by snake. Not that the high-school students would know that the asp-to-the-breast has any suckling significance, but there again is the word “sucks.” They probably would have enjoyed the prevalent sexuality of the play; it is strongly represented in their modern day culture.

Walter Cohen, in his introduction to *Antony and Cleopatra* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, discusses the “female, dark, colonized, available, animalistic, exotic, and excitedly dangerous” portrayal of the Cleopatra-from-the-East that has pervaded the last two centuries. Shakespeare characterizes Cleopatra in the very first speech as possessing a “tawny” front. The historical Cleopatra was Macedonian; according to *Britannica Online*, Cleopatra did not possess Egyptian blood and was the first of her dynasty even to learn the language. Cleopatra is not treated sympathetically in Shakespeare—her political shenanigans seem more reprehensible somehow, perhaps because they are linked to her sexuality. While Caesar, Antony, Pompey, and their contemporaries scheme against and double-cross others with impunity, one doesn’t feel the same level of emotional abhorrence to them as we do to Cleopatra’s actions. Perhaps it is Cleopatra’s use of her sexuality in her schemes that amplifies the negative reception of her actions. Interestingly, the historical Cleopatra was also not treated sympathetically by writers of her time. Cohen points out that Shakespeare may have reduced Cleopatra’s political role to “reduce the threat of a powerful woman” (2621). Perhaps the reduction of her political

role tends to highlight her sexual role. Can the difference in one's reaction be based on the source of the characters' power? What is she other than "cunning past man's thought" as Antony states in Act 1, scene 2? Can't cunning be seen as a positive trait in a man?

The sexual issues also blend the private and the political (in stark contrast to the current views) as Cohen points out. Cohen states that the "play insists that one can no longer have it both ways, that politics and sex (or any other kind of grandeur) are irrevocably sundered" (2622). And why do students believe that Shakespeare's works are meaningless in today's society?

Try seeing Cleopatra in a sympathetic light. She was, after all, Queen of Egypt. In none of her behavior does she overtly threaten or intend to threaten Egypt. On the contrary, she uses everyone in order to maintain and increase her power—and she *is* Egypt. How can she get what she craves for Egypt? She uses others. For example, she wants Herod's head but asks herself, "but how, when Antony is gone, / Through whom I might command it?" (3.3.4-6). Yes, she is ambitious—and it is her ambition that undoes her. But just imagine the problems that would have confronted the historical view of women if Cleopatra and Antony had been successful!

Seductive, powerful, ambitious. Yet in the end, Shakespeare maternalizes Cleopatra. As she permanently exits the arena of her defeat, she utters these parting words:

Peace, peace

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,

That sucks the nurse asleep? (5.2.299–301)

Again, as in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare sets up the most gentle and benign of imagery—a baby suckling at its mother’s breast—and uses it to deliver the most heinous of intents. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth comments that as she were suckling her baby, she would right then dash the baby’s brains out if she had so earlier promised. Here, the act is suicide—death—the antithesis of survival, nourishment, and growth. Further, Cleopatra’s “baby” is a serpent—the image of evil.

So we’ve got an ambitious female who uses her sensuality to influence a male to make the wrong choices (and of course is then blamed by the male for his actions) and is linked with (mother to?) a serpent that, in fact, destroys her. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra has very interesting parallels to Milton’s Eve.

Adelman weighs in with an illuminating read that posits Antony becoming one with the asp in her psychoanalysis of the maternal in Shakespeare: “In Cleopatra’s final words, he becomes one with the asp, the baby at her breast, as she carries them both toward death: “O Antony! Nay, I will take thee too. / What should I stay—” (5.2.311–12). Adelman argues that Antony tells us that Cleopatra’s “bosom was [his] crownet, [his] chief end” (4.13.27) and by Cleopatra’s melding Antony with the asp, he reaches his goal, a return to the maternal (*Suffocating* 187). Adelman argues that this is a positive view of the maternal. One supposes that in the context of certain death at the hands of others, or worse to Cleopatra and Antony, life as the spoils of war, a come-to-mommy-so-we-can-sleep-peacefully-and-eternally argument can be made, even if not believed.

In Plutarch, Shakespeare’s source for *Antony and Cleopatra* according to Mercedes Broussard in “Mother and Child: Cleopatra and the Asp,” Cleopatra applied the asp to her *arm*. Shakespeare purposefully diverges from Plutarch’s account. Broussard

mentions that it has been previously shown that this action makes Cleopatra appear more womanly, and Walter Cohen states that putting the asp to her breast allows Cleopatra to become a “Roman matron” (2625). It is arguable that the imagery also allows Cleopatra to be defined as a mother of another sort. Broussard points out that identifying the baby, the product of Antony and Cleopatra’s illicit love, as an asp further defines Cleopatra, its mother, as a serpent. Through this linkage, and Cleopatra’s subsequent death, Shakespeare is able to overlay the scene with judgments consistent with the moral conventions of the times (26).

Historically speaking, England was full of tales of the other—dark, tawny, new races were being discovered through exploration and the increase of colonial trade. In addition, anxiety ran rampant not only over the blurring of the physical borders that colonial activity caused, but also over the political and religious conflicts that brewed in the homeland. In “‘Nourish-Milke’: Breast-Feeding and the Crisis of Englishness, 1600–1660,” Rachel Trubowitz hypothesizes that the heightened anxiety fueled the admonitions of mothers to breastfeed their own children. In a return to or reform of hearth, home, and motherhood, it is the maternal breast that becomes the focus of national unity and wholeness (32):

Maternal breast-feeding became morally and medically invested in the safeguarding of domestic and national integrity by filling children/subjects with filial devotion to family and state and immunizing them against the dark taint and infection bred by foreign and unfamiliar/unfamiliar attachments. What may thus seem to be the marginal history of nursing reveals in fact the centrality of breast-feeding tropes—and the cultural

values they enshrine—to the period’s fraught and highly divisive efforts to frame the evolving nation-state. (49)

Shakespeare, with his genius at weaving cultural concepts into his work, may very well have been aware of these anxieties and the subsequent focus on maternal nursery. It would not be that much of a stretch to argue that it may be one of the reasons Plutarch’s asp bites Cleopatra in the arm while Shakespeare’s asp is put to the breast.

Whatever the motivation, Shakespeare deliberately uses nursing imagery for another dramatic scene. According to Caroline Walker Bynam, for twentieth-century readers, “the breast is for us primarily an erotic object,” whereas “to medieval people, the breast, flowing or not, signified food” (qtd. in Paster 197). In psychoanalytic theory, Paster reminds us that the breast “has always signified the infant’s first source of gratification,” and cites Anne Hollander’s contention that allowing “for eroticism in the sight of a women giving suck,” the breast’s ““basic eroticism is always reassuringly transcended by the everyday sanctity of mother’s milk. Breasts bring pleasure to everyone, and sight of them brings its own visual joy besides; and so images of breasts are always sure conveyers of a complex delight”” (qtd. in Paster 197). Following this argument, Shakespeare has again juxtaposed complex delight with heinous intentions by having Cleopatra put the asp to her breast in order to die.

If the breast represented life-giving sustenance, the poisonous asp surely represented a life-taking agent. Instead of the woman tenderly nursing the infant to sleep, the infant is viciously and permanently putting the mother to sleep. Paster concurs that “Cleopatra’s suicide metaphorically reverses the ordinary meanings of the nurse with baby at her breast” and that she “enacts an antinursing.” She further asserts that

Cleopatra “inverts the customary power relations in birth and wet-nursing” by having the mother desire death from the baby, instead of having the baby be terrorized by abrupt weaning or a murderous mother (241). Shakespeare takes a suicide and invests it with far more meaning by representing it in terms of nursing imagery.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth speaks of nursing an infant and then murdering it. Shakespeare turns the imagery on its head in *Antony and Cleopatra*: the loving dyad turns brutal when the nursing “baby” kills its mother, Cleopatra. Through Shakespeare’s use of the imagery in both plays, the argument can be made that while he certainly plays on the importance of suckling in the cultural landscape of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England, he does not view maternal nursery as a positive experience.

IV. STATELY SURROGATES

Turn the dial on that AM radio and you are bound to run into a conversation debating the role of women in the military. For that matter, the topic even finds its way onto the small screen: just recently in the second and hopefully final Gulf War, a soldier was taken prisoner and subsequently rescued. Much ado was paid to the particular soldier as television networks scrambled to produce the movie of the week and newsmagazines courted an exclusive interview; the rescued soldier basked in the spotlight more than even the war hero who saved many of the same company that day by single-handedly making his way to a weapon and destroying the opponent's artillery nest. And what was all the fuss about? The rescued prisoner of war happened to be female.

Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, set in the time of the Romans, also deals with the gendering activity of war. Throughout history, women have stayed home and tended to hearth and home while men have donned gear and with gusto headed off to protect the defenseless, dependent women and children. In *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*, Coppélia Kahn concurs that historically men have been the warriors. In the few instances when exceptions occurred, the woman was an agent of a higher power like Joan of Arc, who was, not incidentally, burned at the stake as a witch—one of the irrefutable charges against her being that she was wearing men's clothing—or were perhaps physically mutated like the Amazons, whose name, scholars believe, is derived from being without breast or undergoing amputations in order to “draw the bow rather than nurse the baby” (145).

Even though women were not part of the battlefield action, history shows that as mothers they certainly influenced the process. Kahn references social and literary history that highlights instances where not physically making the trip to the front lines, women prepare their sons for the trip by arming them: ancient Greek texts have Thetis arming Achilles in the *Iliad*, while Aeneas is armor plated by Venus in the *Aeneid*. In fact, such texts as Plutarch's *The Sayings of Spartan Women*, which contains many vignettes of mothers both scolding their sons for cowardly behavior in battle and rejoicing if they died bravely in battle, were available to Shakespeare (145).

And as defined in peculiar Spartan fashion, a woman's main purpose in life was to produce sons for the state. Spartan social code dictated that once a boy turned seven, he was to go and live in the barracks with all the other men and be a warrior. Adult males lived their entire lives in barracks, slipping out occasionally to sleep with and hopefully impregnate their wives so that more Spartan warriors would be produced. The highest civic duty for males was to fight and die for the state while a woman's was to produce more males who could go and fight and die for the state. This is evidenced in the gravest of ways: inscriptions on tombstones were forbidden except for men who died in battle and women who died in childbirth. There remain echoes of this practice of producing sons for the state in the days of the British Empire when Victorian women were urged to "lie back and think of England" during intercourse.

Roman women, however, enjoyed enormous power in rearing sons: truly, the axiom "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" applied in Roman times. More than simple incubators, Roman women were expected to nurture their young:

Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, figures prominently in Plutarch's biography of her sons, Tiberius and Caius. He emphasizes her part in making them "more civill, and better conditioned, than any other Romans in their time" so that "education prevailed more in them, than nature." (qtd. in Kahn 147)

Imagine a film with all the infamous tragic heroes' spirits undergoing modern day psychoanalysis. The film would open with Coriolanus' ghost lounging on the psychiatrist's couch in the division of famous war criminals, free-associating the word mother with war. Or perhaps protesting, "It's really not my fault, Doc, if you had had a mother like mine, Volumnia, you'd have turned out the same. The only time I could please her was when I was slaying the enemy and furthermore, the more wounds I received, the happier she'd be." Modern day audiences would be quick to identify with that Freudian logic as pervasive as it is: we all rightly or wrongly blame or ascribe responsibility for our actions on our childhood upbringing. And Coriolanus would have more than a mouthful to chew in rehashing his childhood.

In *Coriolanus*, the last of the plays based upon the Roman tradition, Shakespeare moves the feminine from the wings as in *Julius Caesar* and posits it center stage by making Volumnia a major character and further, according to Kahn, "In the relationship between its hero and his mother, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* offers a troubling, richly problematic treatment of the cultural nexus between bearing children and bearing arms" (147). In Act One, scene three, Coriolanus' mother Volumnia and his wife Virgilia sit sewing on two low stools in what seems domestic tranquility. First, Volumnia advises Virgilia on what her demeanor would be if her husband were away at war:

I pray you, daughter, sing, or express yourself in a more comfortable sort. If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love. (1.3.1–4)

Volumnia then continues expressing her feelings as mother to Coriolanus' predicament:

When yet he was but tenderbodied and the only son of my womb, when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way, when for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honour would become such a person—that it was no better than, picture-like, to hang by th' wall if renown made it not stir—was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he returned his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. (1.3.5–15)

“See Doc,” says Coriolanus upon the couch, “my wife told me that when she was distraught by my absence, this is what my mother was telling her: ‘So, Virgilia, I was even happier that when I sent him to war as a young boy, he proved himself by risking life and limb than when I first heard my baby was a boy! You as his wife should rejoice that he is off to war—he may return as a hero.’ But I did return, although wounded. But wait until you hear how my mother reacted to my injuries”:

Menenius: Where is he wounded?

Volumnia: I'th' shoulder and i'th' left arm. There will be large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand for his place. He received in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts i'th' body. (2.1.132–36)

“Doc, not ‘Thank God you are okay—I’m so sorry you are wounded.’ But instead, all she cared about was how many scars I could show the masses so they would make me Consul. It’s true, you know. She says so herself”:

I have lived

To see inherited my very wishes,

And the buildings of my fancy. Only

There’s one thing wanting, which I doubt not but

Our Rome will cast upon thee. (2.1.184–88)

“But that’s not all. She really has this twisted way of expressing how I came to be so valiant. It’s downright physical”: “Thy valiantness was mine, thou sucked’st it from me” (3.2.128).

Kahn points to the valiantness/sucked’st passage as significant in that both nurture and nature collapse into one. In *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant cite Cicero: Roman sons were said to be “brought up not so much at their mother’s breast as by her speech” (206). Kahn relates that Shakespeare conflates “the ideological indoctrination performed by the mother from the physical nurture she provides...evoking through the physical bond of nursing the emotional undertow of Volumnia’s dominating authority over—or of—her son” (149).

It's not surprising that Shakespeare collapses the nature/nurture arguments. A widely held belief in the seventeenth century was that the characteristics of the woman or animal were transmitted through their milk into the child or offspring. Crawford cites a contemporary description of breast-feeding that illustrates that the milk was thought to carry the mother's "characteristics of body and mind." Baines wrote of the breast-feeding Lady Essex that through her milk, "she restamps her own good qualities upon her offspring" (Crawford, "Sucking" 31). To illustrate, many critics point to Flamineo's justification of his base behavior to his own mother, Cornelia, in *The White Devil*. Cornelia has just caught Flamineo trying to pander his sister, Vittoria, to the married Brachiano, and toward the end of his speech declares:

And shall I,
 Having a path so open and free
 To my preferment, still retain your milk
 In my pale forehead? (1.2.334-37)

Later, when Vittoria exclaims, "O ye dissembling men!" in response to both Brachiano and Flamineo's shifting stances, Flamineo quickly retorts: "We sucked that, sister, / From women's breasts, in our first infancy" (4.2.179-81).

In addition to the dramatic references, many traits were ascribed to the nursing history of well-known people. For example, Adelman mentions in a note to her article "Born of Woman" that King James claimed to have sucked his Protestantism from his nurse's milk and that "his drunkenness was also attributed to her" (126). Because Charles I wanted his children to be Protestant, he wouldn't allow them to have a Catholic nurse, "but an argument which pamphleteers employed in 1649 against Prince Charles as

a monarch was that he had ‘suckt in his fathers principles with his mothers milk’” (Crawford, “Sucking” 31).

It was widely known that diseases could be transferred between the nurse and infant in the process of breastfeeding. When one such disease, syphilis, became recognized as sexually transmitted, it became conceived of as worse than that other repulsive plague, leprosy. Syphilis now carried an additional moral stigma with it. Since the nurse’s milk was capable of transmitting syphilis to her charge, it was also widely believed that the nurse’s morals were capable of being transmitted as well (Adelman, “Born” 126). Early descriptions of syphilis contained, according to Susan Sontag in “On AIDS,” versions of metaphor including both God’s punishment of an individual and of a licentious community (291). It’s not that much of a stretch to imagine other moral characteristics transmitted through breast milk as well. Literature urging mothers to nurse their own children usually also contained express directions on obtaining a wet-nurse free of disease and other moral defects. The modern equivalent of this discussion centers around AIDS and maternal breastfeeding: authorities have yet to decide whether the benefits of breastfeeding in cultures deficient in health care resources outweigh the risks for infants of mothers infected with the virus that causes the disease since it can be transmitted through nursing.

There is another possibility that could explain why persons in the Early Modern Period would make the assumption that more was being transmitted to the child than just the milk: it would be obvious in the child’s use of language that culture was being transmitted from the surrogates to the child. Remember that the child was usually sent out to be wet-nursed for a period of up to three years. Modern theories of child

development point to the physical growth of permanent brain structures in a child's first years and the formation of the child's permanent personality by age three. While the percentage of influence of hereditary versus environmental stimulus and response continues to be debated, it has been shown that if certain behaviors are not mastered by a pre-determined age, they either may never be mastered or only partially mastered. Modern psychologists theorize, for example, that the ability to develop a conscience occurs in the small window of opportunity between birth and age three. Noam Chomsky has proposed that a Language Acquisition Device is hard-wired into human brains but ceases to function at around the age of twelve. Mastery of a foreign language after this point is difficult if not impossible. Similar studies have been conducted in the music field, for example, on discovering the optimal ages for learning how to play musical instruments, currently thought to be prior to the age of twelve.

If nothing else were noticed during the Renaissance, a child's speech patterns certainly would have been. Edmund Spenser specifically mentions speech as one of the transferred characteristics and imbues it with cultural significance when he deplored the use of Irish wet-nurses in 1596:

the child that sucketh the milk of the nurse must of necessity learn his first speech of her The smack of the first will always abide with him, and not only of the speech, but of the manners and conditions They moreover draw into themselves, together with their suck, even the nature and disposition of their nurses . . . so that the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish. (qtd. in Costello 180)

“But Doc, not only was my mother happy that I was sent to war when only a boy and was wounded twenty-seven times in the course of my fighting career, as my wife was worried sick about me, my mother went on to describe me with bloody brow in the thick of the fight, mowing down the enemy. Then she chastised my beloved with speech that mixed what should be the most tender, loving act of nursing a baby with the most violent images. Honestly, Doc, it is almost Lady Macbeth-like”:

Virgilia: His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!

Volumnia: Away, you fool! It becomes a man

Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba

When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier

Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood

At Grecian sword, contemning. (1.3.35–40)

Kahn puts forth an interpretation of the “the parallel and opposition of nursing mother and bleeding son” that points out that the breasts and the forehead serve as metonymy for the woman and warrior respectively, and further that “The flowing breast...rather straightforwardly defines her *raison d'être*: to suckle future warriors” (131). And as in Sparta, the mother shall produce sons for the state....

Adelman psycho-interprets this passage as Hector moving from feeding mouth to bleeding wound. She postulates that what is suckled by the vulnerable infant from the mother is spit out as blood in an aggressive, yet socially accepted manner: “The wound spitting blood thus becomes not a sign of vulnerability but an instrument of attack” (*Suffocating* 149).

Aggression is socially accepted in warfare only if it is your side doing the aggressing. Volumnia certainly produced Coriolanus for the state, and after the state uses him to fight its battles, it refuses to make him Consul, and banishes him to exile. Unable to turn from his warrior ways, he succeeds in returning to the gates of Rome where Volumnia meets him on bended knee to plead for Rome's fate. Volumnia wins (sort of); Coriolanus returns to the enemy camp and a swift and certain death.

So the boy who was nursed is dead and the mother that nursed him is the agent of his death. While the characters are more realistic—Shakespeare gives us a human mother and a human son—the end result of the maternal nursery is definitely not positive. Therefore, as in *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare does not appear to view maternal nursery as a positive experience.

V. STATUESQUE SUSPENSION

Many of today's students do not realize that humans are scientifically classified as mammals: "warm-blooded higher vertebrates that nourish their young with milk secreted by mammary glands," according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, or that mammary glands are in fact breasts. That in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Mamillius' name is a derivation of mammal, hence meaning being nourished by the breast, and the blatant irony that Mamillius is in fact not, would be completely lost upon them, as would the identification of Mamillius with the lactating body:

Mamilla is the word for the nipple on a breast or a diminutive form of *mamma*, the Latin word for the breast itself. His name thus connects Mamillius to the lactating breast and to the world of women, who in early modern culture presided over childbirth and the early years of children's lives. (Howard 2877)

When King Leontes of Sicily suspects his wife, Hermione's, infidelity in *The Winter's Tale*, one of his first actions is to separate his son, Mamillius, from her. She and Mamillius are pleasantly interacting: Mamillius is telling her stories. Leontes addresses her:

Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him.
 Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you
 Have too much blood in him. (2.1.58-60)

The reason that Leontes is glad that Hermione did not breastfeed Mamillius is that it was widely believed in the Early Modern Period that breast milk was thought to be the same

blood, only whitened, that nourished the infant when *in utero*, even though the anatomically correct system of arteries and veins was known. Hence Mamillius would have received more of Hermione's blood had she nursed him. As evidence for this contention, in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur points to a rhetorical question of Laurent Joubert "one of the great medical popularizers of the sixteenth century... 'And is it not the same blood, which, having been in the womb, is now in the breasts, whitened by the vital spirit through its natural warmth?'" (104). From the time of the ancients, medical theory had subscribed to an economy of fluids theory of human health. The irony here is that although the correct anatomy was known, it was simply ignored. Laqueur states that doctors continued writing "as if the actual vascular pathways simply did not matter" because "the route from the womb to breast is clearly less relevant than the poetics of milk and blood" (105). Crawford relates that some medical theorists claimed that the milk was made in the uterus and transmitted to the breasts, while others felt that the milk was made or distilled from the blood in the breasts ("Sucking" 30). A royal example of the "but blood whitened" concept is captured in the words of Queen Anne, wife of James I: "Will I let my child, the child of a king, suck the milk of a subject and mingle the royal blood with the blood of a servant" (qtd. in Trubowitz 42).

Remember from the discussion in regard to Volumnia's assertion that her valiantness traveled to Coriolanus through nursing that persons in the Early Modern Period assumed that the mother's characteristics could be transferred by breast milk. Therefore, not only would Mamillius have received more of Hermione's blood, he would have been thought to receive her characteristics as well. So Leontes is referring to more

than just Hermione's blood being transferred to Mamillius; he is rejoicing that more of her characteristics were not transferred to him by maternal nursery. In this instance, Shakespeare uses the absence of nursing to frame the separation of mother and child, alluding to the separation of mother and child when the child is sent out to be wet-nursed.

Considering the time the fetus spent in the uterus and the time the baby spent being breastfed, the infant was nourished by the female body for a long period of time. Adelman claims that this dependency on the maternal body is unconsciously used against mothers. She characterizes the interval of nursing as the "delayed weaning" of children until they were two or three, prolonging infancy. It is this prolonged infancy that she claims feeds into the psychoanalytic theory of infantile terror and the resulting directives of whom to blame for such a state: females. She argues that Leontes is in fact reacting this way toward Hermione because she, along with her terrifyingly reproductive female body, separates Leontes from his childhood friend, Polixenes, with whom Leontes suspects she has had an affair.

The premise that breastfeeding until the age of two or three is "delayed weaning" or prolonged infancy can be challenged. Anthropologists have proposed that the natural, biological blueprint for human breastfeeding is between 2.5 and 7 years (Dettwyler 39). Anthropologists find cultural constructions in literature about breastfeeding quite frequently; it is, after all, a biocultural phenomenon. Lawrence Stone, for example, opens his discussion of wet-nursing and maternal breastfeeding with this statement: "In Early Modern Europe, breast-feeding seems usually to have lasted between one year and eighteen months, *and it was therefore a severe burden on a mother* (emphasis added; 426). Science has proven all kinds of benefits for extended maternal nursery: lower

incidences of breast cancer, lower incidences of ovarian cancer, and fewer or more widely spaced pregnancies. Stone's comment seems to reflect his own culture's concept of breastfeeding. Closer to the Elizabethan culture itself is a report by Sir Robert Sibbald (born in 1641), who had a favorable report of his being wet-nursed for an extended period of time or "long suckled":

I sucked till I was two years and two months old, and could run up and down the street and speak . . . which long suckling proved, by a blessing of God, a means to preserve me alive. My nurse was Bessie Mason, a country woman . . . who had all her days a tender affection for me and both before her marriage . . . and after stayed most part of her life thereafter with me. (qtd. in Stone 430)

Scientists, using sophisticated technology, are able to prove that the immunologic properties of breast milk do in fact "preserve" the life of infants. Sibbald, in the Early Modern Period, somehow made the connection. He had only God to which to attribute the cause.

In Act Three, scene two, Hermione not only describes being barred from Mamillius "like one infectious," but also describes the separation from her newly born baby girl:

My third comfort,
Starred most unluckily, is from my breast,
The innocent milk in it most innocent mouth,
Haled out to murder; (3.2.96-99)

Hermione acknowledges the perception of herself as contagious or infectious as Leontes

has previously implied. She then characterizes her milk as innocent. By extension, we can infer that no impurities of her character are being transferred through the milk and therefore, she is also innocent of adultery. Nevertheless, Leontes has stripped her of any power by separating her from her children and forcing her to appear before she has properly recovered from pregnancy, both physically and socially. Perhaps Leontes is jealous of the power that reproduction affords women; in addition to their bodily function, they were in charge of children for the formative years of their lives (in the case of male children, until they were breeched.) Or perhaps Leontes is afraid of that power. Howard contends that Leontes identifies with Mamillius and “seems to feel both the vulnerability of the infant dependent on the lactating body of woman and the vulnerability of the adult husband dependent on the pregnant body and the chastity of his wife for legitimate offspring” (2877).

Paster proposes that *The Winter's Tale* can be read as an allegory of wet-nursing. Perdita's violent weaning, according to Paster, “is rather a version, romantically heightened, of what happened soon after birth to countless babies in the wet-nursing culture, though in most cases without so explicit an infanticidal motivation” (273). Many Renaissance mothers blamed the deaths of their infants on wet-nurses' negligence. Tracts directed at mothers urging them to breastfeed made sure to point out this danger. It may be argued that infants were sent out with at least an implicit understanding of the increased risk of death.

Perdita, on the other hand, is sent away by Leontes to be killed in a directive to Antigonus using language that should sound familiar:

Thou, traitor, hast set on thy wife to this.

My child? Away with't! Even thou, that hast
 A heart so tender o'er it, take it hence
 And see it instantly consumed with fire.
 Even thou, and none but thou. Take it up straight.
 Within this hour bring me word 'tis done,
 And by good testimony, or I'll seize thy life,
 With what thou else call'st thine. If thou refuse
 And wilt encounter with my wrath, say so,
 The bastard brains with these my proper hands
 Shall I dash out. Go, take it to the fire;
 For thou set'st on thy wife. (2.3.131-142)

There just is not the same intensity of drama in this baby-brain-dashing-passage as in Lady Macbeth's speech. First, the dashing is not preceded by some tender-loving image, and second, the dash doer is male. No matter what century in which one lives, it is just more horrific for a mother to kill her baby than a father. After more discussion, Leontes instructs Antigonus to take the baby to some foreign place "Where chance may nurse or end it" (2.3.183). Antigonus swears to do so and then says to baby:

Come on, poor babe,
 Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens
 To be thy nurses. Wolves and bears, they say,
 Casting their savageness aside, have done
 Like offices of pity. (2.3.185-189)

In a play with a human character named Mamillius, we have a man sending a baby girl

out into the wilderness while another man muses that even bears and wolves have been reported to take pity and nurture (suckle?) the babe. No need to worry, Perdita, brains intact, is instead nurtured by a family of lower status who has been paid for the service, thanks to the foresight of Antigonus. Through the experience, she retains all the attributes that mark her as royal. She returns home and her birth family is reunited while the status of her nurture family increases as they become members of the royal household. Perdita does not acquire any negative characteristics from her adopted family.

So Mamillius is not suckled by his mother and dies while Hermione laments that she cannot nurse Perdita and then loses sixteen years of her life by being turned to stone. It can be argued from the images and actions of this play that Shakespeare viewed maternal nursery as important and positive. Perdita, who was presumably wet-nursed by a family of lower status, meets a prince, falls in love, discovers she is a princess, and is returned to her real royal family. It can also be argued that Shakespeare believed that wet-nursing could be a positive experience, as Perdita is not punished. In either case, Shakespeare's characters and his use of breastfeeding imagery have both become more sophisticated and realistic than in any of the previous plays.

VI. CLOSING THE CURTAIN

The Winter's Tale, with its descriptions of “innocent milk,” “innocent mouth,” “haled out to murder,” contains the nurturing/destructive imagery that *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* also possess. In each case—a mandate for murder, a suicide, being wished wounded in warfare, or left in the wilderness to be nursed by chance, ravens, kites, or perhaps wolves or bears—a horrendous action is described against or within the context of tender nurture. This juxtaposed nursing/death imagery serves to heighten the drama of the significant passages in which it occurs.

In, to borrow a term from the School of Business, “a blinding flash of the obvious,” all audiences, especially those at high school level with whom enthusiasts share Shakespeare’s works, should be made to understand the importance of breastfeeding and hence its significance in heightening the drama in the works of Shakespeare and other sixteenth and seventeenth-century dramatists. But more sophisticated audiences (enquiring minds always want to know) may wish to probe the issue further to determine if there is any significance in the order of the plays with regard to the use of the images of breastfeeding, or if perhaps a certain order could shed more light on Shakespeare’s beliefs.

The order of the discussion of the plays in this paper was determined by the order in which they appear in the *Norton Shakespeare*, which in turn is based on the Oxford Edition. Even though the most distinguished scholars were involved in the edition, Stephen Greenblatt reminds us that Shakespeare scholarship is not an exact science because evidence is missing; therefore, scholars still quibble about the dates that the plays

were produced and many search for clues in order to correctly date Shakespeare's work. Perhaps an examination of how the images of suckling are incorporated into the plays can shed light on linkages or relationships in the plays that are not time dependent.

In *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*, Janet Adelman groups *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* together in the sixth chapter, "Escaping the Matrix: The Construction of Masculinity in *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*." She begins the discussion of mother versus masculine in both plays by stating: "Maternal malevolence is never as horrific in *Coriolanus* as in *Macbeth*: *Coriolanus* localizes and domesticates the power of the witches and Lady Macbeth in the literal relation of mother and son" (147). Translated, Adelman refers to the Lady Macbeth's infant dashing and take-my-milk-for-gall as opposed to the human relationship between Volumnia and Coriolanus that involves the transmission of valiantness and Volumnia's comparison of nurture to warfare. Adelman is correct in her assertion: in *Macbeth*, the scenes that incorporate suckling are more intense and hence more dramatic. But they are more removed from everyday life when compared with *Coriolanus*. Lady Macbeth conjures up images of tenderly caring for an infant and then speaks of infanticide while Volumnia talks of nursing and bleeding wounds of victory in the same breath. But given the historical evidence that seventeenth-century persons thought that milk was "but blood whitened," one may surmise that the images in the suckling-breasts-of-Hecuba-do-not-look-lovelier-than-the-bleeding-forehead-of-Hector passage are more likely to be linked, and therefore, the juxtaposition loses some of its shock or dramatic value. Lady Macbeth appeals to the witches to be suckled by her; Volumnia claims Coriolanus sucked his valiantness from her. In addition, *Macbeth* includes the parody of

the suckling sailor, further removing the imagery from the literal. It could be argued that Shakespeare is becoming more sophisticated or serious in his use of suckling imagery over time, as *Macbeth* is generally regarded to have preceded *Coriolanus*.

But *Antony and Cleopatra* comes between, and it would be too smooth a journey if all were laid out sans curves in the criticism. Cleopatra is a highly sensual character, very far from the maternal. In fact, the nursing imagery appears at the very end, when Cleopatra suicides by “suckling” the serpent. Interestingly, in the very next chapter of *Suffocating*, “Making Defect Perfection: Imagining Male Bounty in *Timon of Athens* and *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Adelman weighs in on the characterization of Cleopatra as a kinder, gentler version of the prevalent fear of female sexuality:

The nightmare vision of female sexuality that initiates the tragedies and problem plays has its place in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but that place is partial: the violent language of sexual loathing familiar from *Troilus and Cressida*—language of venereal disease, of fragmentation and spoiled food—makes a muted appearance in Roman accusations of Cleopatra but is finally dissolved as Cleopatra becomes a sense of wholeness. (191)

And how is this defect perfected? In one manner that directly involves the nurturing breastfeeding images. Adelman elaborates about Cleopatra:

Through her, the baby cast violently away from Lady Macbeth’s breast is restored to nurturance in the end; and the witchcraft of *Macbeth* is recuperated in Cleopatra’s enchantment. (191)

One can make a case that Lady Macbeth imagines casting away the baby while Cleopatra does draw it in, if one suspends the notion in the latter case that that “it” is an it—a

serpent. The second part of Adelman's assertion is a bit more difficult to swallow. Even though Cleopatra is characterized as sensual, she does put a serpent to her breast while Lady Macbeth only summons the witches to hers. Overall though, Cleopatra is much more realistic than Lady Macbeth, and this supposed redemption does fit the accepted timeline of the plays in that *Macbeth* is thought to precede *Antony and Cleopatra*. One can argue that the person doing the nurturing is treated as more sophisticated by Shakespeare, as Cleopatra is a far more rounded and lifelike character. After Lady Macbeth's come-all-you-witches-speech, she fades right out of the play. However, *Antony and Cleopatra* is thought to predate *Coriolanus*, which makes for a bit of a sticky wicket. But considering that "it" is a serpent that Cleopatra supposedly nurtures, one can argue that Shakespeare's use of breastfeeding images does become more realistic in *Coriolanus*.

Like Volumnia, Hermione has produced a son for the state, Mamillius, whom she does not nurse, and he becomes sick and dies after she is imprisoned for alleged adultery. Hermione gives birth in prison and her baby daughter is sent out to be killed, or at least nursed by chance. Hermione then is reported dead by Paulina, but is resurrected in the final scene of the play: after Perdita is returned home, and as Leontes repents his actions in front of a statue of Hermione, it comes to life. Given the historical evidence, it is not too far a stretch to argue that Mamillius dies because he was not nursed by his mother; that Perdita lives because she was nursed by a stable family of a lower class; and that Hermione was punished by the loss of time she spent as a statue for not nursing her young.

Adelman assesses *The Winter's Tale* in the eighth chapter of *Suffocating*,

“Masculine Authority and the Maternal Body: The Return to Origins in the Romances.”

In concluding the seventh chapter, she remarks:

The whole of *Antony and Cleopatra* overflows the measure; in its interpretative openness, its expansive playfulness, its imaginative abundance, it seems to me to lead directly to *The Winter's Tale*, where trust in female process similarly bursts the boundaries of the tragic form. (191).

If there is trust in the female process, then the action of the play reveals the consequences of not following the female process. Also, *Coriolanus* is thought to be dated between *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*. So following Adelman's organization, the plays would order *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Winter's Tale*. But switching the order of *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* is not that much of a stretch because the nursing imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* does involve a serpent where in *Coriolanus*, the nursing imagery involves mother and child and at least refers to a mythological mother and child. I argue that the scenes in which maternal nursery images are involved are evolving to a more realistic and hence sophisticated view of nursing and would order the plays based on analysis of such images as they appear in *The Norton Shakespeare*. Perhaps we are one play short of seeing a woman tenderly suckle her own infant and live happily ever after.

Equally fascinating is the fact that human society has not come to terms with issues surrounding women's breasts and breastfeeding five hundred years after Shakespeare inscribed his imagery, and that many of the concerns dealing with breastfeeding in the Early Modern Period have simply redefined themselves and remain

part of the modern day discussion. The images of both nursing and perverse nursing are pivotal in and integral to *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Winter's Tale*. In *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640*, Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus point out that drama was to Renaissance audiences what cinema is today, and then some: “On a day when all nine public theatres in Shakespeare’s London were open, it was theoretically possible for 10 percent of the population to attend . . . a truly popular art form that both shaped and reflected popular modes of perceiving women” (127). Including “the poetics of milk and blood.”

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