Fountains of Love: The Maternal Body as Rhetorical Symbol of Authority in Early Modern England

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Abstract: For Erasmus, the two fountains streaming milky juice—a new mother’s breasts—represent powerful symbols of love and authority. Erasmus describes the mother’s breasts as fountains oozing love to the sucking child. Elizabeth Clinton extends the image of Mother to represent God, reminding the nursing mother that when she looks on her sucking child, she should remember that she is God’s new born babe, sucking His instruction and His word, even as the babe sucks her breast. Dorothy Leigh extends the image of the nursing mother to an image of Christ himself. Mother’s love, especially a breast-feeding or “lying in” mother’s love, is one of the most authoritatively gendered representations of love. Issues of gender and authority converge often around the image of the breast-feeding mother. Drawing on the image of the nursing mother, Dorothy Leigh and other early modern writers actively engaged in the most contentious and public debates of their day, including the authority of men, preachers and kings.

Keywords: mother, love, feminism, conduct manuals, seventeenth century, domestic space

1. Introduction

During the early years of the seventeenth century, the print market was flooded with conduct books that offered instructions for nearly every aspect of life. Although it might seem strange to us, the breastfeeding mother was a popular topic for instruction. Writers took varying positions. Some claimed the woman’s breasts were vital to the development of a person’s soul. Others claimed that a woman’s breasts were destructive and full of deceit. One
element that conduct manuals had in common is that they were almost exclusively written by men. However, a few women were able to enter into public debates about appropriate conduct. In fact, a few women used the rhetorically powerful symbol of a breast-feeding, or nursing, woman’s physical body to move beyond the private sphere into public debates. Two of the most successful examples of this transition into the public domain were Elizabeth Clinton and Dorothy Leigh. They both drew on the woman’s physical body, namely her nurturing breasts, as a rhetorical symbol not only of love, but also of authority. This maternal authority allowed them to enter into debates that extended beyond nurturing children into controversial discussions about the patriarchal structure of society in general.

2. Context of the Breast-feeding Debate in the Seventeenth Century

In the early seventeenth century, conduct manuals attempted to define everyone’s roles. The fad among upper-class women was to “put” the child out to a wet nurse. Women worried that nursing a baby would make the woman look older and less attractive. It soiled clothing. It was inconvenient. Some women claimed that they were too weak to nurse their babies.¹ The poorer class of mothers began to imitate the upper-class mothers and to hire nurses. This caused financial burdens on their families. The defenders of breastfeeding pointed to the selfishness and error of the trend. For instance, In Seven dialogues both pithie and profitable, Erasmus argued that mothers should nurse their babies.² One of his dialogues is referred to as The Lying-In Mother. In it, Erasmus attacks the fashion of hiring a nurse. In a dialogue between Fabulla, a lying-in mother, and Eutrapilus, her visiting friend, Eutrapilus reasons with Fabulla reminding her of a mother’s duty to nurture her child. He reasons that it is both unnatural and unhealthy to give the child to a nurse. He claims that “a child needs to breathe the mother’s fragrance.” He explains that the body is the “garment of the soul,” and so the mother who cares for the infant’s body cares also for the soul. He reasons:

If you would be a compleat Mother, take Care of the Body of your little infant [. . .]. As often as you hear your Child crying, think this with yourself, he calls for this from me. When you look upon your Breasts, those two little Fountains, turgid, and of their own accord streaming out a milky Juice, remember Nature puts you in Mind of your Duty: Or else, when your Infant shall begin

² Although Erasmus published in Latin, his work was translated into English in several editions. His Seven dialogues included specific instructions for mothers, particularly about caring for children.
to speak and with his pretty Stammering shall call you Mammy. How can you hear it without blushing? When you have refus’d to let him have it, and turn’d him off to a hireling Nipple, as if you had committed him to a Goat or a Sheep. When he is able to speak, what if instead of calling you Mother, he should call you Half-Mother?\(^3\)

In addition to making mothers feel guilty and neglectful, Erasmus accuses mothers of abuse. He claims that by not nursing an infant, the mother endangers the baby’s health and wellbeing. He argues that the “genius of Children are vitatied by the Nature of the Milk they suck [. . .]. Do you think there is no foundation in Reason for this Saying, *He suck’ed in this ill Humour with the Nurses’s Milk*?”\(^4\) There was a common belief among early modern society that infants took on the emotional characteristics of the person who nursed the child.

Finally, Erasmus claims that nursing is a mother’s duty. He challenges mothers to be obedient to their duties:

> Do you think there is any one in the World will go through all the Fatigue of Nursing as the Mother herself; the Bewrayings, the Sitting up a Nights, the Crying, the Sickness, and the diligent Care in looking after it, which can scarcely be enough. If there can be one that loves like the Mother, then she will take Care like a Mother. [. . .] You have not performed the Duty of a Mother before you have first formed the tender Body of your Son, and after that his Mind, equally soft, by a good Education.\(^5\)

In his dialogue, Erasmus espouses and endorses the authority of the mother to shape the body and soul of another human being. The mother’s emotional characteristics are passed through the milk. The babe in her arms is “God’s blessing,” and the mother meets her responsibility through the gendered act of breast feeding. A nurturing mother, then, becomes a rhetorically gendered symbol of authority, a person who can shape the very souls of those she nurtures.

William Muggins is another writer who explains the significance of a breast-feeding mother. In *Londons Mourning Garment* (1603) Muggins, describes the “affective bond between mother and child” that was forged, according to early modern views, during gestation and nursing. In an elegiac poem, he describes a mother’s grief at the death of her three children during an outbreak of the plague:

\(^3\) Desiderius Erasmus, *Seven dialogues both pithie and profitable* The 1 is of the right vse of things indifferent. 2 sheweth what comfort poperie affordeth in time of daunger. 3 is betwene a good woman and a shrew. 4 is of the conversion of a harlot. 5 is of putting forth children to nurse. 6 is of a popish pilgrimage. 7 is of a popish funeral, 2nd ed., London: Nicholas Ling, 1606, p. 58.

\(^4\) Erasmus, *Seven dialogues*, p. 58

\(^5\) Erasmus, *Seven dialogues*, p. 58
Ah my swett Babes, what woulde noe I have done?
To yeelde you comfort, & maintaine you here
To feed your mouthes, though hunger pincht me neere;
All three at once, I woulde your bodies cheere.
    Twaine in my lappe, should sucke their tender Mother,
And with my foot, I would have rockt the other.⁶

The emphasis on the mother’s breasts did more than simply remind readers of the mother's care for her children. It also provided a strong appeal to maternal ethos. In spite of her own hunger, the nurturing mother cares for three children: one at each breast, and one in a cradle rocked by her foot. Naomi J. Miller claims that a mother’s authority originated in the “irresistible force of maternal love.”⁷ She claims: “One might argue that mothers were the figures most empowered, and even expected to express passionate desire in the early modern period.”⁸ That maternal power and the passion that creates it extend beyond the domestic sphere into “society at large.”⁹ Offering her breasts at the expense of her own comfort, a mother reminded readers that her breasts are physical emblems that represent the power of overwhelming love.

3. Elizabeth Clinton and Breastfeeding Mothers

Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, was one of the few women who entered into the debate about a nursing mother’s responsibilities. She advanced the discussion further than Erasmus and Muggins. She shows the breastfeeding mother as nurturing and caring for the soul of the nursing child, but she adds an additional layer. She connects the rhetorically powerful image of Christ into the discussion, in additional to the more traditional image of the nurturing mother.

As a mother who bore eighteen children, Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, admitted with regret that she acted under bad counsel and the authority of others in giving her children to nurses. In one of the few early modern texts written by a woman, she attempts to explain the importance of breastfeeding. She warns others not to make the mistake that she made. She claims that two of her children died because of “dissembling nurses.” She writes:

⁸ Miller, “Hens Should be Served First,” p. 171.
⁹ Miller, “Hens Should be Served First,” p. 172.
Be not so unnatural as to thrust away your only children: be not so hardy as to venter a tender Babe to a lesser tender heart: [. . .]. Think alwais, that having the child at your breast, and having it in your armes, you have Gods blessing there. For children are Gods blessing. Thinke againe how your Babe crying for your breast, sucking hartily the milke out of it, and growing by it, is the Lords owne instruction, every hole, and every day, that you are sucking it, instructing you to shew that you are his new borne Babes, by your earnest desire after his word.10

In this case, Clinton compares a mother’s breasts to Christ’s instructions. The child sucking at the mother’s breast becomes an image of the mother who should be sucking wisdom and teachings from Christ. A mother, especially a mother influenced by Renaissance humanism, was tasked by law with the duty to attend sermons regularly and see that her family did the same. By the early 1600s preachers literally had a captive audience. Women felt a deep responsibility to “suck” the Word of God and disseminate it to their children. In other words, a mother in church was gaining the spiritual sustenance that she then passed on to her children. By doing this, she was figuratively nursing them, providing sustaining godly manna. As a God-fearing mother, her role included teaching and training obedient male and female members of society. Her breasts represented both the receptacle and the dispenser of moral wisdom.

Women were required to attend sermons, and many women took their duties seriously. The Act of 1593 required that everyone over the age of sixteen attend Sunday church service. The punishment for violating the act was to be “hanged” or banished. Jeanne Shami and Greg Kneidel challenge the notion that women were separated from the practice of sermons. They stress that women were subjects of sermons, patrons of sermons, consumers, transmitters, audience and preachers. Women also understood their duty to correct their husbands when the need arose. As an example, they relate that Katherine Brettergh was praised for “upbraiding her husband for being angry on the Lord’s Day and for oppressing poor tenants by collecting rents.”11 According to Shami and Kneidel, a wife correcting her husband was a form of preaching and, surprisingly, it was admired in Brettergh’s case.

Shami and Kneidel also present Lady Anne Harcourt who was commended for “enforcing a household regimen of Sunday services, including hearing the word read, examining her maidservants on the sermon’s contents, and repeating it for their benefit.”12 In this sense, Lady Anne was preaching a sermon for a select group of household servants, but her influence extended

beyond those in her immediate household. Shami and Kneidel claim that women such as Lady Anne Harcourt were “capable religious speakers and mediators of the Word, exerting their religious influence beyond their families, over their ministers, and sometimes over the whole parish.” Early Modern women were active patrons of sermons. They were figuratively challenged to learn the teachings of the sermon and then reproduce the sermon at home for their children and servants, and even for their husbands.

Clinton, Brettregh and Harcourt were Early Modern women who offered instruction that crossed into social and religious debate in Early Modern patriarchal society. Sermons were the most effective means of presenting new ideas to a wide audience, but not everyone was pleased with all of the new ideas. They were especially displeased with preachers whom they viewed as underqualified. There was a general emphasis on ensuring a trained clergy. Puritan women, especially, demanded to hear the word. They saw it as essential. The Protestant’s duty was to hear the word of God. The preacher’s duty was to deliver the word of God. The women's duty was to attend sermons and then pass the information along to their families. Women, by necessity, were encouraged to be literate. Women were doing their duties when they attended sermons, kept commonplace books and passed along the sermons to those around them, including a broader audience than their own children and servants. Women felt that the preachers needed to do their jobs more effectively. For instance, Katherin Whitehead disrupted a sermon about the duties of women by shouting, “You do your job, and then I’ll do mine.” Ap-

parently Early Modern women took their nurturing duties seriously, but they also insisted that preachers fill their nurturing roles. Their physical presence at sermons reminded the preachers of their duties and exerted an influence outside of their homes.

Clinton’s conduct manual about breast feeding extends the image of a breast feeding woman to the image of a human being attending a sermon and partaking of the nurturing word of God. The Woman is sucking from Christ’s breast. Clinton becomes an example of a female writer using the maternal ethos rhetorically, not only to remind mothers to care for their children but also to admonish all of God’s children to come to him for sustenance, as the Children of Israel received manna from God. Her conduct manual goes beyond being simply a manual about the importance of breastfeeding. It shows the importance of being nurtured by the good word of God. The image of the nurturing mother being nurtured by Christ gives Clinton a veiled

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opportunity to preach. In other words, she can remind people of their duty not only to their children but also to their God and those around them. During this period of time, any discussion of a woman’s role or a man’s role could be viewed as a discussion of patriarchal society in general, including the role of a king and the role of his subjects, as the order of the home supposedly mirrored the order of the kingdom.

4. Joseph Swetnam: The Dangerous Power of a Woman’s Breasts

Joseph Swetnam wrote a popular pamphlet that offered a different interpretation of the power of women’s breasts. Instead of harboring nurturing Milky Juice and reminding readers to hear the word of God, the woman’s breast harbored poisoned hatred. With the publication of his pamphlet, *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615), Swetnam reignited the *querelle des femmes*. This *querelle* (the debate about women) had been going on for centuries but had recently died down.

In the opening paragraphs, Swetnam dedicates the book to women, whom he labels lewd, idle and forward. One of the first women to be arraigned by Swetnam is the “breastfeeding mother.” In his fury against women, he claims that he cares not whom he offends, even if it is his own mother. He spouts: “I am weaned from my mothers teat, and therefore neuer more to bee fed with her pap: wherefore say what you will, for I will follow my own vein in unfolding every pleat, and shewing every wrinckle of a womans disposition.” In this explosion of anger, Swetnam identifies his own mother as a nursing mother and claims to be willing to expose her and every other woman. He identifies his own mother as one who did her duty to nurture her son. Swetnam appears particularly callous and implicates himself as one of the “giddy-headed” young men he addresses early in his book. Women’s breasts, he claims, are not fountains for “milky juice.” Instead he writes:

Betwixt their brests is the vale of destruction. [. . .] They are ungrateful, peri-ured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, unconstant, waspish, toyish, light,

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sullen, pround, discourteous and cruell. [. . .] [A woman] will give thee rost
meat, but she will beat thee with the spitte [. . .]. [Women] are like Eagles,
which alwaises flie where the carrion is. [. . .]. They will play the horse-leach to
suck away thy wealth, but in the winter of thy misery shee will flie away from
thee [. . .] leaving nothing but dirt hind he.20

Here Swetnam rejects the image of a nurturing woman whose breasts offer
nourishment and the “fragrance of the mother.”21 Instead, the woman’s breasts
conceal destruction, and rather than sucking spiritual sustenance from Christ,
according to Swetnam, the mother “sucks” the livelihood from her family and
then deserts those who need her. Swetnam also claims that “[mother’s] brest
will be the harbourver of an envious heart, and her heart the storehouse of
poisoned hatred. [. . .] Women are called the hooke of all evill, because men
are taken by them, as fish is taken with the hooke.”22 Swetnam references the
power of the woman’s body, namely her breasts. However, in stark contrast
to Elizabeth Clinton, he uses the image to illustrate the froward, or crooked,
nature housed within the breasts and also to illustrate the destructive force
they are to those exposed to that power.

Although the debate about the nature of women was not new, the number
of responses that Swetnam’s pamphlet generated was new. I have previously
argued that Dorothy Leigh’s writing should be seen as one of the first and
most effective responses to Swetnam’s pamphlet.23

5. Dorothy Leigh: The Saving Power of a Woman’s Breast

The “breastfeeding mother” was a popular topic for both Joseph Swetnam
and Dorothy Leigh as a response to Swetnam. Published shortly after Leigh’s
death, The Mothers Blessing is often placed in the company of the dying-parent
legacy genre or the mother’s legacy. Researchers often dismiss it as intimate
motherly advice.24 However, Leigh’s writing does not sit comfortably among
other motherly advice books, most of which are written after her book was
published. In fact, the final chapter of The Mothers Blessings includes a sting-

21 Erasmus, Seven dialogues, p. 58.
23 See Julia D. Combs, “There’s No Place Like Home: Constructing Ethos in Dorothy
24 See Lloyd Davis, “Redemptive Advice: Dorothy Leigh’s The Mother’s Blessing,” in Jo Wall-
work and Paul Salzman, Bundoora (eds.), Women Writing, 1550-1750, Australia: Maeridian,
2001, pp. 58-63; Teresa Feroli, “Inflex Simulacrum: The Rewriting of Loss in Elizabeth Jos-
celin’s The Mother’s Legacy,” ELH 61 (1994), pp. 89-102; Jennifer Heller, The Mother’s Legacy in
ing condemnation of the mismanagement practices of princes and a plea to the people to pray for the preachers. These kinds of comments are not found in dying-parent legacies written by either male or female writers in the seventeenth century.

The Mothers Blessing is a tightly organized and carefully crafted treatise that calls for political and social reforms. In the opening pages of The Mothers Blessing Leigh describes herself as a “fearefull, faithfull, and carefull Mother” who seeks to “write” her sons the “right” way to “heaven.” Her motherly love, her duty to her deceased husband, and her own approaching death motivated her to take the unusual risk of publishing her advice. Leigh justified her unusual decision to publish by explaining: “Neither care I what you or any shall thinke of mee, if among many words I may write but one sentence, which may make you labour for the spirituall food of the soule, which must be gathered every day out of the word.” This early passage points to the nurturing authority and devotion of the Mother.

The Mothers Blessing has been ignored, misinterpreted or briefly glossed over by most scholars, who see it as a “domestic advice” book. However, it is a complex document. It reveals a rhetorically astute author who engages contemporary religious, political and social debates. For examples, Leigh uses the breastfeeding-mother image to show how “carefull” the mother is. Leigh “turns” Swetnam’s image and channels it into a startling contrast. In the


26 Dorothy Leigh, The Mothers Blessing, Or The Godly Counsaile of a Gentle-woman not long since deceased, left behind her for her children containing many good exhortations, and godly admonitions, profitable for all parents to leaue as a legacy to their children, but especially for those, who by reason of their young yeeres stand most in need of instruction, 2nd ed., London: John Budge, 1616, p. 4.

27 Leigh, The Mothers Blessing, p. 6. Throughout this project original spelling, punctuation and capitalization have been preserved as they appear in the second edition of The Mothers Blessing published in 1616. I have silently replaced v with u for readability.
opening dedication to her sons, she describes herself as a “fearfull, faithfull, and carefull” mother. She says that she is offering them “spiritual manna” or “spiritual food for the soul.”28 Not only does a mother provide, from her physical body, physical sustenance, but she also helps to provide spiritual food, or manna. Leigh expands on the image of the nurturing mother who provides sustenance for her children. She stresses that mother’s motivation is due to her love for them and her duty to her husband. She asks: “Is it possible, that she, which hath carried her child within her, so near her heart, and brought it forth into this world with so much bitter paine, so many grones, and cries, can forget it?”29 She answers:

Nay, rather will she not labour now till Christ be formed in it? Will shee not blesse it every time it suckes on her brests, when shee feeleth the bloud come from her heart to nourish it? Will shee not instruct it in the youth, and admonish it in the age, and pray for it continually? Will shee not be afraid, that the child which shee endured such paine for, should endure endless paine in hell?30

Then she asks,

Will not a mother venter to offend for the world her childrens sake? Therefore let no man blame a mother, though she sometime exceede in writing to her children, since every man knows, that the love of a mother to her children, is hardly contained within the bounds of reason. Neither must you, my sonnes, when you come to be of judgement, blame me for writing to you, since Nature telleth me that I cannot long bee here to speake unto you.31

Leigh claims that a mother cannot forget her nursing child. A breastfeeding mother literally cannot forget a sucking child. If the baby misses a feeding, the mother’s breasts become painfully engorged. The mother can develop serious complications, including painful infections. In other words, it is physically painful, and nearly impossible, for a breastfeeding mother to “forget” her sucking child. But even if it were possible that mothers could forget, Leigh reminds readers of one who never forgets. She then turns the image of the breastfeeding mother to a biblical source. Leigh references Isaiah 49:15 in the Old Testament. Isaiah asks: “Can a mother forget the Child of her Wombe?” The scripture answers that it is nearly impossible for a mother to forget her sucking child. But even if it were possible for a mother to forget, Christ will not. He has his “children’s” images engraved on the palms of His hands, and their “walls” are continually before him. In other words, a breastfeeding woman is more likely to forget her sucking child than Christ is likely

29 Leigh, *The Mothers Blessing*, p. 11.
to forget His “sucking” children. The image most like Christ, or in other words, the image of the person who is least likely to forget the needs of those for whom she cares, is a nursing mother. Only a mother’s love can compare to Christ’s love, represented in Isaiah by the image of mother’s nurturing breasts. Everyone else may forget, but Christ will not.

Leigh cites from the Geneva Bible. The marginal notes that accompany these verses in the Geneva Bible make the text politically charged. The notes remind readers that *tyrants* (a term used in the Geneva Bible and strongly disliked by King James) will ultimately be subdued. Then Isaiah further complicates the image of the woman’s body by comparing it to kings and fathers. Isaiah claims that Kings will become “nursing fathers” and queens “nursing mothers” to the children of Israel: God’s children. Before that time, however, there will be confusion and chaos, and it may seem to the world that God has forgotten his covenant people, but God will never forget. The marginal notes reassure the reader that God has not forgotten and that God is the ultimate ruler, not earthly kings. Isaiah 49 ends with, “I will save thy children, and will feed them that spoil them with their owne flesh, and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweete wine; & al flesh shal knowe that I the Lord am thy Saviour & thy redeemer, the mighte one of Jakob.”32 In other words, those who reject God will be fed with their own flesh and become drunken with their own blood, as with wine. Leigh’s reference to Isaiah is a reminder to readers of the authority inherent to a woman’s physical body, most prominently her nurturing breasts. Her breasts literally provide life-giving sustenance and figuratively provide live-giving manna to God’s obedient sons and daughters. A woman’s body provides Leigh with a rhetorical image that also reminded her readers of Christ and His saving power. She aligns herself with Christ. Swetnam claims that woman feeds on the “carrion” flesh of her husband’s goods. Leigh uses biblical references to claim that the wicked will feed on one another. She channels the “nursing mother” image to a biblical source that reminds readers of the love of God toward his children. And God never forgets his children. Leigh’s images here represent an instance of what could be labeled a maternal authority statement. Leigh gains credibility as a mother by drawing on powerful biblical images of nursing mothers who represent the image of Christ.

God never forgets his children, but both Leigh and Swetnam claim to forget themselves. Both have moments of selective amnesia. Swetnam claims that he momentarily forgot himself. He explains:

Indeed, when I first began to write this booke, my wits were gone a wool-gathering, in so much that in a maner of forgetting my selfe, and so in the rough of my fury, I vowed for ever to be an open enemy unto women.33

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Swetnam admits that his wits had abandoned him, but he went ahead with his writing anyway. By this, Swetnam appears selfish, careless and callous.

Leigh also has a case of selective amnesia. She claims that she “forgot” herself as well, but she forgets herself (but never her children). Her excessive care for her children makes that impossible. She explains: “Know therefore, that it was the motherly affection that I bare unto you all, which made me now (as it often hath done heretofore) forget my selfe in regard of you.” Early modern society excused mothers because of their over abundance of emotion. However, Leigh’s amnesia is logically explained. She appears rational and even references the Bible to support her claims.

In an interesting way, Leigh’s forgetfulness reminds us who she is. In Chapter 32 of *The Mother’s Blessing*, Leigh claims that if she were a man and a preacher, she is sure that she could convince those who are praying incorrectly to pray in the right way. Shortly after making this claim, Leigh does indeed “preach” a sermon about prayer to her reader, exactly as she would if she were “a man and a preacher.” And she follows all of the guidelines for sermons as outlined by William Perkins in *The Art of Prophesying* (1606).

Rhetorically, she has reminded readers that she is not a man, nor is she a preacher. But she has also claimed that she could do their job better than they can. By reminding us who she is not, she uses a maternal authority statement that reminds us who she is. She is a woman, a mother, a Christian and a widow. She is entitled and expected to have strong emotional attachments. Some critics have claimed that the female authors of mother’s legacies had to “erase” themselves in order to be “heard.” One critic calls for the “immanent extinction” of the female writer, claiming that “the only way to become a perfect early modern woman is to become a dead early modern woman.” Becker sees Leigh’s amnesia as evidence of Leigh attempting to “erase” herself. I take the opposite view. In this case, I side with Heller, who has recently argued in favor of a non-erasure theory regarding mothers’ legacies. Heller notes the physical and material importance of the dying mother.

34 Leigh, *The Mothers Blessing*, p. 5.
38 Although I agree with Heller that early modern women writers did not “erase” themselves, I take an opposite stance from her when she claims that Leigh presents herself as a “helpless woman [. . .] rather than a bold woman making the uncommon decision to publish”: see Jennifer Heller, *The Mother’s Legacy*, p. 618. Heller argues that by presenting herself as “dying,” Leigh emphasizes her material body, augmenting the body’s importance. Thus, Leigh does not “erase” herself. I agree with Heller that the material body is not erased, but I disagree with her interpretation that Leigh presents herself as a weak and helpless woman. Instead, I argue that Mother's
cal body, with the breasts that symbolize her nurturing power, is ever present, even after the death of the physical body. As Mazzola has argued, "mothers, even dead ones, were powerful images." Naomi J. Miller claims that a mother’s authority originated in the “irresistible force of maternal love.” She claims: “One might argue that mothers were the figures most empowered, and even expected to express passionate desire in the early modern period.” She argues that the maternal power of the woman’s physical body extends beyond the domestic sphere into “society at large.”

The emphasis on the mother’s breasts did more than simply remind readers of the mother’s care for her children. It also provided a strong appeal to the maternal ethos. Swetnam claimed to forget himself in an emotional outburst of anger, and Leigh claimed to forget herself in the God-like act of nurturing her children, physically represented by the act of breastfeeding. Leigh explains that one of the reasons for her “forgetfulness” is so that her sons will not forget her teachings. She reminds them that “this my mind will continue long after mee in writing.” Puttenham claims that the most powerful form of argument in all “oratoric craft” is “to behold as it were in a glasse the lively image of our deare forefathers, their noble and virtuous manner of life, with other things authentike, which because we are not able otherwise to attaine, to the knowledge of, by any of our sences, we apprend them by memory.” Leigh is not only a mother, but she is also a dying mother. Her text was published shortly after her death. She explains that by preparing her words to be published in *The Mothers Blessing*, she continues to nurture her children and society even after her mortal body is gone.

Leigh’s images of the nursing mother are powerful reminders of a mother’s authority. By comparison, Swetnam appears to be excessively emotional and garrulous, traits usually assigned to wives. And by comparison, James appears to be a forgetful tyrannical “nursing father.” Dorothy Leigh, Elizabeth living body, as well as her corpse, is a powerfully strong image. Early modern writers, male and female, went through the traditional motions of justifying print due to various outward pressures, including being compelled by others. However, Leigh’s presentation of herself is not as a helpless woman. It is quite to the contrary, as I hope this project illustrates. Also, Leigh’s reasons for publication are unique, and they established the groundwork for her publication. I do not include being a “weak and helpless woman” as one of the reasons that Leigh publishes.


40 Naomi J. Miller, “‘Hens Should be Served First,’” p. 170.

41 Naomi J. Miller, “‘Hens Should be Served First,’” p. 171.

42 Naomi J. Miller, “‘Hens Should be Served First,’” p. 172.


Clinton and even Erasmus use the mother’s gendered physical body to establish authority that allows women, including Dorothy Leigh, to successfully attack Joseph Swetnam as well as criticize King James and engage in some of the most contentious debates of her society.

6. Conclusion

Erasmus establishes the context of the discussion of a woman’s role, particularly her duty as nurturer. Mullins shows us the common perception of the nursing mother as love, even to the point of sacrificing one’s own comfort and necessity to nurture another human being. Clinton advances the nurturing debate from a woman’s point of view and connects the image of the nursing mother to the image of Christ. Swetnam exposes an alternative but powerfully authoritative interpretation of a woman’s breasts. Dorothy Leigh takes the discussion back to Christ, citing biblical examples of the nursing mother as a symbol of Christ, who was possibly the most rhetorically powerful image of care and devotion in seventeenth-century England.

According to Leigh and her biblical ources, only a nursing mother could compare to Christ. She is the least likely to forget her role as nurturer. Even kings should strive to be like her. The reading public of the seventeenth century knew the context of the scriptures she cited from the Old Testament books of Habakkuk and Isaiah. In those chapters, dogs lick up the blood of powerful but unrighteous kings. In the early seventeenth century, any discussion of religion would be interpreted as a political discussion. Leigh enters the conversation about the authority of kings by placing herself, and all nursing mothers, in the company of Christ and thus in a position to warn the king regarding the limitations of his power. The king is ultimately responsible to God. And kings who forget that responsibility come to a bad end.⁴⁶ Leigh’s reading audience probably would have made those connections. As evidence of the reading public’s perception of Leigh’s Mother’s Blessing, I note that the 1624 edition of The Mother’s Blessing at the Bodleian Library is bound between two highly political sermons that debate the Oath of Allegiance to King James.⁴⁷ The fact that this edition exists offers us some clues as to the seventeenth-century readers’ inter-

⁴⁶ See the story of Ahab in 1 Kings 22 in The Bible and Holy Scriptures Contained in the old and new testament, 1st ed., Geneva, 1560. Dogs licked the blood of Ahab, according to the prophecy of Elijah.

pretation of Dorothy Leigh’s conduct manual. Apparently they saw the book as having implications beyond raising her three sons to be godly men. They saw the book as contributing to authority in the home and in society.

The most unique rhetorical aspect of Dorothy Leigh’s book is that her discussion of authority does not overstep the gendered boundaries of acceptable behavior expected of a mother, a wife, a widow and a Christian. In other words, she behaves as society would expect a woman to behave. She consistently calls attention to women, widows and their physical bodies. This consistency creates a strong and solid appeal to ethos. By emphasizing a woman’s body and its nurturing capacities, especially the capacity to nurture another human being, she speaks with confidence from the potentially restrictive position of confinement within the home. She bypasses those boundaries by working from within them and maintaining a strong ethos.

Leigh’s unique rhetorical strategies allow her to disseminate her printed words to a broad readership that routinely censored and vilified women writers, even dead ones. In her case, however, readers viewed her writing as a socially significant contribution to important social and political debates, including the politically volatile debate about who should be wielding authority and who should obey. Because female-authored publications are so rare, her publication deserves more attention as a representation of successfully accessing the popular world of print culture. Because of the unique way she exploited, to her advantage, a woman’s body as a potentially powerful rhetorical device, her publication deserves additional research as to its importance to seventeenth century women’s rhetoric. Both Clinton and Leigh used women’s bodies to convey important messages in the seventeenth century. Their writings deserve further attention and analysis as examples of writing that used gendered symbols, such as women’s breasts, to successfully access public debate about responsibility and authority in the home and in society at large.

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