

## **Views on maternal breast-feeding in England. Alan Macfarlane**

Let us first look at the advice on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Here there seems to have been an almost identical situation to that in Holland, namely that for the next three centuries both doctors and clerics would be unanimous in advocating the use of mother's milk, rather than wet-nursing. As Crawford summarizes the literature, 'Contemporary opinion was strongly in favour of a mother feeding her own child. Preachers and physicians campaigned strenuously against wet nursing during the seventeenth century.'<sup>2</sup> Let us look at some of the material in a little more detail.

English doctors were unanimous in the view that mothers should feed their own children whenever possible. In 1545 Phaire noted that infant animals would take the characteristics of those whose milk they sucked, thus if sheep sucked on goats, their hair grew coarse. 'Whereby it doth appeare, that the mylke and nourishyng hath a marveyulous effect in changing the complexion...' Therefore 'it is agreing to nature so it is also necessary and comely for the own mother to nource the owne child. Whiche if it may be done, it shall be most comendable and holsome...'<sup>3</sup> A little later, Cogan also advised that 'giving sucke is a mother's dutie.'<sup>4</sup> Seventeenth-century midwives also warned of the dangers of wet-nursing whereby 'children do partake more of the conditions of the nurse, than the mother...'<sup>5</sup> and argued that it was preferable that women breast fed their own children. Mrs.Sharp pointed out that the custom of the rich using wet nurses, 'changeth the natural disposition of the child, and oftentimes exposeth the infant to many hazards...' Those who said they had not enough milk, 'pretended weaknes when they have no cause for it, because they have not so much love for their own, as Dumb creatures have.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the advice given in the most popular eighteenth century medical textbook was part of an old tradition. Buchan argued that though some women were not able to do so, those who could, should do so. 'Every mother who can, ought certainly to perform so tender and agreeable an office...A mother who abandons the fruit of her womb, as soon as it is born, to the sole care of an hireling, hardly deserves that name.'<sup>7</sup> Thus the medical view was that it was better and safer for the mother to feed her own child.

This was powerfully re-enforced by religious arguments. As we have seen, it seems to have been the general Christian tradition that mothers should suckle their own children; after all the infant Jesus was breast-fed by the Virgin Mary, not by a wet nurse. This view was pan-European; for example Vives in xxx argued that mothers should suckle their own children. What is interesting is that Protestant, and particularly Puritan, writers, clearly saw a growing threat to such a tradition, a dangerous tendency towards wet nursing among their affluent congregations.

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<sup>1</sup> A good overview of the arguments is provided by Fildes, *Breasts* pp.98ff.

<sup>2</sup> Crawford, *Suckling* (xerox), 31

<sup>3</sup> Phaire, *Boke*, p.18

<sup>4</sup> Haven, p.149

<sup>5</sup> R.C. *Complete Midwife*, p.166

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Sharp, *Midwives*, p.353

<sup>7</sup> *Domestic*, p.3

One of the earliest and most famous exhortations to breast-feeding by mothers was written in the 1530s by Thomas Becon, chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer. It is worth quoting at length, for it includes many of the central arguments put forward again and again by Protestant writers. 'Thirdly, it is the duty of a good and natural mother not to put forth her children to other women to be nourished, fostered, and brought up with strange milk, except very necessity compel her; but to nurse them herself, yea, and that with her own milk. For to what end hath God given her milk in her breast, but that she with the same milk should nourish and bring up her children? If God hath created nothing in vain, then hath he not given that milk into the mother's breast without cause; verily to nourish and to bring up her infants. Those mothers therefore, which, either of niceness or for ease, put out their children from them to other, when they themselves have abundance of milk, and might well bring them up, if they would take the pain; as they be but half mothers indeed, so likewise do they greatly offend God, and corrupt the nature of the infants. They offend God, in that they resist his ordinance and workmanship by putting away their milk, and by the refusing the labour of nursing their children, which God as a penance hath laid upon them. They corrupt also the nature of the infants, in that they be fostered and brought up not of their mothers, but of strange women; not with the natural, but unnatural milk. And by this means it many times comes to pass that children, being brought forth of gentle and godly parents, prove churlish and wicked, and utterly estranged from the nature and good disposition of the parents. For children, by drinking in strange milk, drink in also strange manners and another nature. Therefore, as it is the duty of a good and natural mother to nurse her child herself, yea, and that with her own milk; so likewise is it the part of a true father to provide that his wife, having abundance of milk, do not refuse the labour of fostering her infant, according to the work and commandment of god, knowing that in so doing she shall greatly please God, and satisfy the office of a true and natural mother.'<sup>8</sup>

In the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, famous Puritan writers uttered the same warnings. Dod and Clever wrote 'Amongst the particular duties that a Christian wife ought to performe in her Familie, this is one: namely, that shee nurse her owne children: which to omit, and to put them forth to nursing, is both against the law of nature, and also against the will of god. Besides it is hurtfull, both for the childe bodie, and also for his wit; and lastly, it is hurtful to the mother her selfe, and it is an occasion that shee falleth into much sickness thereby...The woman therefore that can suckle her child and doth it not, but refuseth this office and dutie of a mother, declareth her selfe to be very unthankfull to God, and (as it were) forsaketh and contemneth the fruit of her wombe...'<sup>9</sup> Miles Coverdale wrote that 'The woman should nourish their own children with their own breasts...'<sup>10</sup> and William Perkins agreed.<sup>11</sup> One more set of arguments for not using wet nursing was put forward by William Gouge in 1622.

The first argument was the hereditary one, combined with sentiment. 'Together with the milke passeth some smacke of the affection and disposition of the mother: which maketh mothers to love such children

<sup>8</sup> Becon, (1844, 347-8) quoted in Goody, *Development*, p. 69-70

<sup>9</sup> Godlie, p.234-37

<sup>10</sup> Christian, *Matrimony*, p.82v

<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *Oeconomie*, p.135-36

best as they have given sucke unto: yea and oft times such children as have sucked their mothers breasts, love their mothers best: yea we may observe many who have sucked other milke, to love those nurses all the daies of their life.<sup>12</sup> The second argument was concerned with the medical dangers, and gives some impression of the mortality of wet nursed children. 'Shall I adde another argument which daily experience confirmeth, namely Gods blessing upon this motherly dutie: commonly such children as are nursed by their mother prosper best. Mothers are most tender over them, and cannot indure to let them lie crying out, without taking them up and stilling them; as nurses will let them crie and crie againe, if they be about any businesse of their owne. For who are commonly chosen to be nurses? even poore countrie women which have much worke to doe, and little helpe; and so are forced to let the childe lie and crie, many times till it burst againe. Children nursed by their mothers are for the most part more cleanly, and neatly brought up, freer from diseases; not so many die: I am sure not so many through negligence cast away. The number of nurse children that die every yeer is very great. It hath been observed in many countrie villages, that the most part, that from time to time die there, are nurse children. Are not mothers that might have nursed their owne children if they would, accessary to the death of those that are cast away by the nurses negligence?'<sup>13</sup> The third argument concerned the health of the mother. 'The drawing forth of a womans milke by her childe is a meanes to get and preserve a good stomach, which is a great preservative of good health.'<sup>14</sup>

The medical and theological advice was supported by other, more general, writers. At the start of the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas More in his **Utopia** described how in his perfect world 'every mother is nurse to her own childe, onles either death, or sycknes be the let' - in which case a nurse should be found.<sup>15</sup> In the later sixteenth century, in his much read **Advice to a Son** Percy wrote that breast-feeding should be done by the mother, particularly interesting advice coming from the pen of a nobleman.<sup>16</sup> Robert Burton wrote that 'melancholy like other diseases was engrafted, as it were, and imprinted into the temperature of the infant by the nurses milk.'<sup>17</sup> We end this survey by leaping two centuries and reversing the recipient of the advice.

William Cobbett in the 1830s wrote a letter of advice **To a Father**. In this he argued that the first duty of a father to his son was 'above all things, to ensure, if possible, **an ardent love of their mother**. Your first duty towards them is resolutely to prevent their drawing the means of life **from any breast but hers**. That is their **own**. It is their **birthright**; and if that fail from any natural cause, the place of it ought to be supplied by those means which are frequently resorted to without employing a **hireling breast**'. The first argument was to do with nutrition. 'In the first place, no food is so congenial to the child as the milk of its own mother; its quality is made by nature to suit the age of the child; it comes with

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<sup>12</sup> Gouge, Domesticall, p.512

<sup>13</sup>Gouge, Domesticall, p.512-3; for similar arguments by Archbishop Tillotson in the eighteenth century, see McLaren, Breast-feeding (xerox), p.387-8

<sup>14</sup> Gouge, Domesticall. p.515

<sup>15</sup> More, Utopia, p.63

<sup>16</sup> Percy,Advice, p.58

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in McLaren, Breast-feeding (xerox), 389-90

the child, and is calculated precisely for its stomach.' The second was for the satisfaction it gave the mother, notwithstanding the physical pain. 'And, then, what sort of a mother must that be who can endure the thought of seeing her child at another breast! The suckling may be attended with great pain, and it is so attended in many cases: but this pain is a necessary consequence of pleasures foregone; and, besides, it has its accompanying pleasures too. No mother ever suffered more than my wife did from suckling her children. How many times have I seen her, when the child was beginning to draw, bite her lips while the tears ran down her cheeks! Yet, having endured this, the smiles came and dried up the tears; and the little thing that had caused the pain received abundant kisses as its punishment.' This had given Cobbett great satisfaction - deepening his love for his wife. Of all the sights that this world affords, the most delightful in my eyes, even to an unconcerned spectator, is, a mother with her clean and fat baby lugging at her breast, leaving off now-and-then and smiling, and she, occasionally, half smothering it with kisses. What must that sight be, then, to the **father** of the child!" Then there was the effect on the mind and character of the child, and particularly the bond between parent and child. 'Besides, are we to overlook the great and wonderful effect that this has on the minds of children? As they succeed each other, they see with their own eyes, the pain, the care, the caresses, which their mother has endured for, or bestowed, on them; and nature bids them love her accordingly. To love her ardently becomes part of their very nature; and when the times comes that her advice to them is necessary as a guide for their conduct, this deep and early impression has all its natural weight, which must be wholly wanting if the child be banished to a hireling breast, and only arms that which formed part of her own body?'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cobbett, ADvice, p.212-16