

In his 1899 novel, *Fruitfulness*, Émile Zola writes, “There is no more sacred symbol of living eternity than an infant at its mother’s breast. It is a mother’s duty to nurse her child [...] When we know how to worship motherhood our country will be saved.”<sup>1</sup> With this quote Zola illustrates the degree to which moral and political judgements were ascribed to the seemingly simple act of breastfeeding within nineteenth-century France. By examining different depictions of breastfeeding produced during the latter half of the nineteenth century, this essay will examine the various political, social, cultural, and economic factors that were projected onto the female breast. Focusing specifically on the representation of the wet nurse, the essay will explore how the role of the wet nurse liberated upper-class women and simultaneously commodified lower-class ones within the nineteenth-century culture of leisure and consumerism. After comparing the different formalist representations of the wet nurse in Jose Frappa, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot’s work, the essay will then examine Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s depiction of his wife breastfeeding to illustrate how the glorification of maternal breastfeeding emerges in contrast to the wet nurse. The essay will conclude by arguing that representations of the private, intimate act of breastfeeding paradoxically epitomize larger cultural shifts in nineteenth-century France surrounding gender norms, class dynamics, and social expectations.

The pictorial representations of nursing in the nineteenth century are heavily influenced by the fraught history of breastfeeding in France. Prior to World War I, French mothers had three options for infant feeding: maternal breastfeeding, wet nursing, and “artificial feeding” (the use of animal milk).<sup>2</sup> Maternal breastfeeding and wet nursing were most popular throughout the 1800s as the use of animal milk was unsanitary before Louis Pasteur discovered pasteurization at

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Zola, *Fruitfulness*, trans. Ernest A. Vizetelly (New York: Mondial, 2005), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Gal Ventura, “Long Live the Bottle: The Rise of the French Bottle-feeding Industry in the Nineteenth Century” *Social History of Medicine* 32, no. 2 (2017): 330.

the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The question of maternal breastfeeding vs. wet nursing was a heavily politicized one in France dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. In the mid-1700s, wet nursing in France was a thriving practice with approximately half of all Parisian children being sent to wet nurses in the countryside.<sup>4</sup> However, in the wake of the French Revolution, there was a strong ideological movement to return to traditional family values in order to reaffirm social order.<sup>5</sup> As a result, maternal breastfeeding was upheld as a key civic duty for French mothers from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> From the 1820s onwards, however, wet nursing experienced a rebirth in France among both lower class and aristocratic mothers who respectively relied on wet nurses in order to continue working themselves or because maternal breastfeeding interfered with their social calendar and was deemed socially unacceptable.<sup>7</sup> This ongoing battle between biological mothers (*mère de sang*) vs. wet nurses (*mère de lait*) was heavily debated by everyone from medical professionals to philosophers and politicians, illustrating how the question of breastfeeding was transformed from a private, maternal decision to one largely governed and regulated by men.<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere can the bureaucratization of the lactating female body be more clearly seen than in the depiction of the wet nurse office. The formalization of the wet nurse office was initially spurred by the resurgence in wet nursing at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Jose Frappa, a French salon painter working in the latter half of the nineteenth century, offers a rare insight into this industry with his realist painting of a wet nurse's office from the 1880s (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Gal Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art*. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Gal Ventura, "Nursing in Style: Fashion versus Socio-Medical Ideologies in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2015): pp. 536-564, 539.

<sup>6</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ventura, "Nursing in Style," 540.

<sup>8</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Whitmore, "Biography of Jose Frappa 1854-1904," *Rehs Gallery Inc*.

image features a room filled with young mothers holding their children and a well-dressed, aristocratic man inspecting their chests. By including an upper-class man in the scene, Frappa accurately represents the typical clientele of the wet nurse office, as historically it was the father who chose the wet nurse and signed her employment papers.<sup>11</sup> The sparsely decorated office setting along with the formal, academic style of painting strips the work of any emotion, depicting the scene as nothing more than a clinical, business interaction. This bureaucratic backdrop robs the women of individualized identities and renders them simple commodities for purchase. The emotionless, sterilized setting also serves to differentiate the wet nurse office from that of the brothel, a space that similarly specialized in the selling of female bodies. Even though both the prostitute and the wet nurse based their livelihood on the selling of their bodies, the wet nurse was favorably viewed as virtuous and nurturing while the prostitute was largely seen as dirty and immoral.<sup>12</sup> Thus, by situating the wet nurse within a clean, well-lit office in contrast to a dark and grimy brothel, it serves to legitimize the practice of buying and selling women's bodies.

Visually, Frappa's depiction of the wet nurse office bears many similarities to Degas' 1873 painting, *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (fig. 2). From a compositional perspective, both images feature a top-hatted man drawn on an identical vertical line that divides the painting into thirds. In Degas' work, the prominent male figure, Michel Musson, serves a similar role as the aristocratic father in Frappa's work as each man carefully inspects the respective goods on offer—namely cotton and the female breast. Degas' image encapsulates what Carol Armstrong refers to as “the privatization of realism,” as the room is filled with people, yet no one seems to

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<sup>11</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 200.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

be interacting.<sup>13</sup> In Frappa's work, the nurses appear equally absorbed in their own worlds as none of the women make direct eye contact with each other. This relates to the larger theme of the bureau acting as an isolating and alienating space.<sup>14</sup> In Frappa's image, this refusal to acknowledge one another's presence furthers the notion that the sacred, maternal act of breastfeeding has devolved into an emotionless business transaction.

Where Frappa's image dehumanizes the wet nurse and presents her as a commodity, Degas' representation of the wet nurse in *At the Races in the Countryside*, 1869 (fig. 3) simultaneously objectifies and celebrates her. At first glance, the image appears to depict a charming portrait of an upper-class family enjoying a leisurely day out at the races. However, as Linda Nochlin notes, the family is interrupted by the presence of an "intruder" as the key maternal figure in the center of the image is not the baby's mother but in fact his wet nurse.<sup>15</sup> With this realization, the viewer's impression of the woman transforms from an attentive mother to a hired servant that acts as an accessory along with all the other trappings of the bourgeois lifestyle in the image including the family's carriage, bulldog, parasol, and the races themselves.<sup>16</sup> This reading of the wet nurse as a mere status symbol relates to Frappa's work and the equation of the wet nurse as merchandise.

The contrast between the way the wet nurse is depicted versus the biological mother heightens this sense of objectification. While the bourgeois mother is presented in modest, formal dress with a tightly buttoned shirt and pinned-up hair, the wet nurse is partially naked with her left breast prominently displayed at the center of the image. This juxtaposition between

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Linda Nochlin, "A House Is Not a Home: Degas and the Subversion of the Family," in *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, ed. Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock (New York: Universe, 1991), 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

the biological mother and the wet nurse alludes to broader class dynamics at play as it suggests that her working-class body is intrinsically available and on view for the public, in contrast to that of the upper-class mother.<sup>17</sup> Gal Ventura argues that the isolation of her singular exposed breast reduces the wet nurse to a “lactating organ” and effectively desexualizes and dehumanizes her.<sup>18</sup> The contrast between each woman's public modesty problematically suggests that the “dismemberment” of the female body is acceptable for the lower-class wet nurse but improper for the wealthy mother who must uphold her prudent appearance.<sup>19</sup>

An alternative reading of Degas’ work can instead view the image as a sympathetic portrayal of the wet nurse. While the side-by-side presentation of the mother and wet nurse enforces a comparison between the two women, it also serves to highlight their closeness. As previously discussed, Linda Nochlin emphasizes how the wet nurse disrupts the nuclear family unit and even goes so far as to suggest that Degas’ preoccupation with the mercenary mother may be a projection of his own familial insecurities.<sup>20</sup> However, solely focusing on the wet nurse as an intruder ignores the intimate relationship between the mother and wet nurse.<sup>21</sup> In the image, the mother is shown holding a parasol to shield both the wet nurse and baby from the sun. The parasol enables the mother to construct a semi-private, domestic space within the larger public arena. The fact that this liminal space is just big enough for the mother, wet nurse, and baby and sidelines the father, highlights the sense that the image is about the harmonious relationship between the two women and the modernization of motherhood. Compositionally, the mother, wet nurse, and baby form a triangle at the center of the image, thereby updating the classical holy family arrangement.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the wet nurse is constructed as an integral member of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 215

<sup>18</sup> Ventura, “Nursing in Style,” 552.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 552-553.

<sup>20</sup> Nochlin, “A House Is Not a Home,” 48.

<sup>21</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 214.

<sup>22</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 214.

modern bourgeois household. Furthermore, the fact that the family is shown at the races, a typical upper-class leisure activity, illustrates how the wet nurse facilitates familial gatherings outside of the home that otherwise would not have occurred had the mother been forced to nurse.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the wet nurse's labor directly contributes to the mother's happiness and autonomy as she allows her to both spend time with her baby while still pursuing pleasurable pastimes.

This notion of the wet nurse liberating new mothers and granting them increased time and freedom can most clearly be seen in Berthe Morisot's 1880 work, *The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet* (fig. 4). Unlike the previous works wherein a male artist depicts wet nurses feeding other people's children, Morisot's work is noteworthy for the fact that she focuses on the relationship between her hired wet nurse and own child.<sup>24</sup> Beyond the radical subject matter of the image, Morisot further challenges convention through the formal qualities of the work. The work's loose and frenzied brushwork blends the figure with the background and exemplifies one of Morisot's greatest forays into non-representational figuration. The sharp, jagged strokes convey a sense of physicality and motion as the viewer can imagine Morisot's hand frantically applying the paint to canvas.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the formal style of the work emphasizes the hidden manual labor that is required of painting. Beyond Morisot's physical construction of the painting, Linda Nochlin argues that the work is also about female labor through the inclusion of the wet nurse at work, i.e., in the midst of feeding. By reframing the image as a representation of women at work, both painting and milk become "products being produced or created for the market, for profit."<sup>26</sup> Morisot's emphasis on female laborers is highly progressive given that both women in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Morisot's Wet Nurse: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 38.

<sup>25</sup> Claire Moran, "Three Impressionist paintings that give an insight into the complicated history of breastfeeding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century," *The Conversation*, October 11, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Nochlin, "Morisot's Wet Nurse," 39.

the scene were not regarded as such at the time; the female painter was seen as an amateur partaking in leisure and the wet nurse simply as a woman fulfilling her biological function.<sup>27</sup>

In considering Morisot's work, however, it is important to not become overly prescriptive in equating the formal style of *The Wet Nurse* as an expression of Morisot's emotions as a mother. In her writings on Morisot, author Caroline Woods has argued that the fractured, stylistic depiction of the wet nurse is a manifestation of Morisot's internal conflict and discomfort as a mother watching her child be breastfed by another woman.<sup>28</sup> However, this reading of the work reflects a problematic tendency to ascribe emotions to female artist's work that would not be considered in examining work by male artists. Therefore, the interpretation of the work as a reflection of Morisot's maternal anxieties both enforces reductive stereotypes of women as overly emotional and assumes a division between wet nurse and biological mother when the true nature of their relationship cannot be fully known.

*The Wet Nurse* is further misread by contemporary audiences who see Morisot as a bad mother given her choice of hiring a wet nurse. Not only does this assumption impose a problematic double standard on female artists by suggesting that her child must suffer as a result of her career (the question of child wellbeing was likely never asked of a male artist like Renior, even though he had five children), it also ignores the social conventions of the time. As Morisot was from a bourgeois background, it was expected that she would hire a live-in wet nurse. Maternal breastfeeding was avoided by upper-class women as it was considered immodest for them to expose their breasts in public and was believed to rob the woman of her natural beauty by deforming the breast.<sup>29</sup> Beyond these social norms of the time, the villainization of Morisot as

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Caroline Woods, "The Female Avant-Garde: Challenging Ideas of Gender in Morisot's *Wet Nurse* and Valadon's *The Blue Room*," *Art Journal* 1, no. 5 (2017), p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Ventura, "Nursing in Style," 548.

a neglectful mother falsely suggests that the hiring of a wet nurse indicates a lack of maternal love.<sup>30</sup> Historical accounts written by Morisot's daughter Julie Manet, dispel this myth by underscoring Morisot's dedication to her child: "Even though I had a nurse, Mother looked after me tenderly. She painted at home during the day and, when we went out, she took along notebooks to sketch me."<sup>31</sup> This quote by Julie reveals how she viewed her mother's practice of painting her as an expression of motherly love rather than neglect. Even though Morisot herself is not featured in the work, her ghost presence as the painter of the scene communicates a sense of the attention she dedicates to her daughter and the physical intimacy they share.<sup>32</sup>

While the wet nurse acts as a liberating force for Morisot by freeing her from her maternal obligations and allowing her to focus on her career, the autonomy of the wet nurse is less clear. Similar to Degas' work, the painting features underlying class dynamics, given the contractual relationship between wet nurse and upper-class mother. For many young mothers from lower-class, rural backgrounds, wet nursing offered a simple way to make money, with the added benefit of living in bourgeois homes and receiving the best treatment of the servants.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, it may seem that the arrangement between Morisot and her wet nurse was equally beneficial for both parties. However, this overlooks the power imbalance that exists between mother/employer and wet nurse/employee. Most of the literature written on Morisot's *Wet Nurse* tends to focus on Morisot's identity as an artist and mother and does not question the extent to which Morisot robs the wet nurse of agency. The idea of a woman artist objectifying a female subject may seem counterintuitive, yet Morisot arguably uses the wet nurse's body and reaps all the benefits herself, both financially (from selling a painting of her) and socially (from

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<sup>30</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 223.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot's Images of Women* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 226.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>33</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 196.



increased freedoms as a result of her work). In this way, the lower-class female body continues to be offered up for consumption while the upper-class woman maintains her dignity. However, the question of whether Morisot takes advantage of the wet nurse is slightly rectified by the fact that she does not sexualize the nurse as the blurred quality of the image blends her body with the background and prevents the viewer from clearly seeing her exposed breast. Furthermore, Morisot takes great lengths to include her name, Angele, in the title which effectively humanizes her.

In contrast to Frappa, Degas, and Morisot's representations of the wet nurse, Renoir represents the act of maternal breastfeeding. Renoir's *Maternity* (fig. 5) from 1885 features his wife, Aline, nursing their young son, Pierre. The iconography of the image suggests a heavily idealized vision of breastfeeding. First, the fact that Aline is represented in the countryside, surrounded by a pastoral landscape, suggests that breastfeeding is a timeless, biological act. By presenting her alongside this agrarian backdrop, far removed from the "masculine" sphere of modern civilization, Aline becomes analogous to a farm cow suckling its calf.<sup>34</sup> Renoir may have chosen to emphasize the rural nature of the scene in order to highlight Aline's peasant background and thus justify the representation of her exposed breast. As Aline was from a lower social class than Morisot, it would have been more acceptable for her to practice maternal breastfeeding.<sup>35</sup> In addition to emphasizing the bucolic scenery in order to highlight the naturalness of breastfeeding, Renoir further romanticizes his nursing wife through the inclusion of religious iconography. The fact that Aline is dressed in red and blue draws heavily on religious symbolism as they are colors traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary in classical painting. The painting's religious undertones can also be seen in Pierre's pose as he is shown

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<sup>34</sup> Ventura, "Long Live the Bottle," 346.

<sup>35</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 379.

holding his leg in a similar manner to traditional representations of baby Jesus.<sup>36</sup> By including these allusions to Christianity, Renoir equates Aline and Pierre to Mary and Jesus and thus underscores the sanctity of maternal breastfeeding.

Unlike traditional representations of Mary, however, Aline's depiction is heavily sexualized. In discussing the intersection between breasts as a symbol of motherhood and a sexual object, Iris Young writes that "breasts are a scandal for patriarchy because they disrupt the border between motherhood and sexuality."<sup>37</sup> Renoir blurs this line between motherhood and sexuality by including Pierre's genitals in the image and thus draws a parallel between male eroticism and the female breast.<sup>38</sup> Aline's pose also heightens the sense of arousal as she is shown holding her breast while looking out towards the viewer. The fact that she gazes directly outwards, towards the viewer instead of the baby, suggests she is aware of the viewer's presence and thus the wholesome moment of nursing devolves into a performative act for voyeuristic male pleasure. Furthermore, her calm gaze conveys a sense of serenity and even enjoyment and thereby discounts the labor that is required of breastfeeding. In this way, Renoir's representation of Aline is completely unrealistic and presents an essentialized vision of maternal breastfeeding and motherhood in general. By producing this type of glorified image of the Marian nursing mother, Renoir actively propagates pro-maternal-breastfeeding messaging and by extension, conservative family values that construct the mother as the primary child carer within the home.

The contrasting representations of the wet nurse and nursing mother seen in Frappa, Degas, Morisot, and Renoir's work illustrate the shifting freedoms of women in France during the latter half of the nineteenth century. While depictions of the wet nurse tend to empower the

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<sup>36</sup> Ventura, "Nursing in Style," 544.

<sup>37</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Breast Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 190.

<sup>38</sup> Tamar Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman," *Oxford Art Journal* 8, no. 2 (1985): 13.

upper-class mother and objectify the lower-class nurse, romanticized representations of maternal breastfeeding subliminally reinforce reductive constructions of femininity as wholly tied to motherhood. Ultimately, these conflicting representations of breastfeeding act as a microcosm for larger nineteenth-century tensions between the public v. private sphere, the working-class vs. upper-class, labor vs. leisure, and women's freedom vs. motherhood. Given the social, economic, and cultural values that are entangled with breastfeeding, debates surrounding nursing have persisted within the modern era. In 2007, Facebook banned images of breastfeeding from its platform, citing them as "obscene content."<sup>39</sup> In the face of this censorship, recent years have witnessed a return to maternal breastfeeding with the "breast is best" movement, which problematically assumes that all mothers are inherently able to nurse their children and ignores those who are incapable of breastfeeding due to medical reasons or economic status. These controversial contemporary ideologies illustrate how, to this day, the female breast continues to be dictated by politics, the media, social class norms, and societal gender roles in a similar manner to the nineteenth century.

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<sup>39</sup> Ventura, *Maternal Breast-Feeding and its Substitutes*, 430.

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Images



Figure 1: Jose Frappa, *The Wet-Nursing Office (Le Bureau des nourrices)*, c. 1880s





Figure 2: Edgar Degas, *A Cotton Office in New Orleans*, 1873



Figure 3: Edgar Degas, *At the Races in the Countryside*, 1869

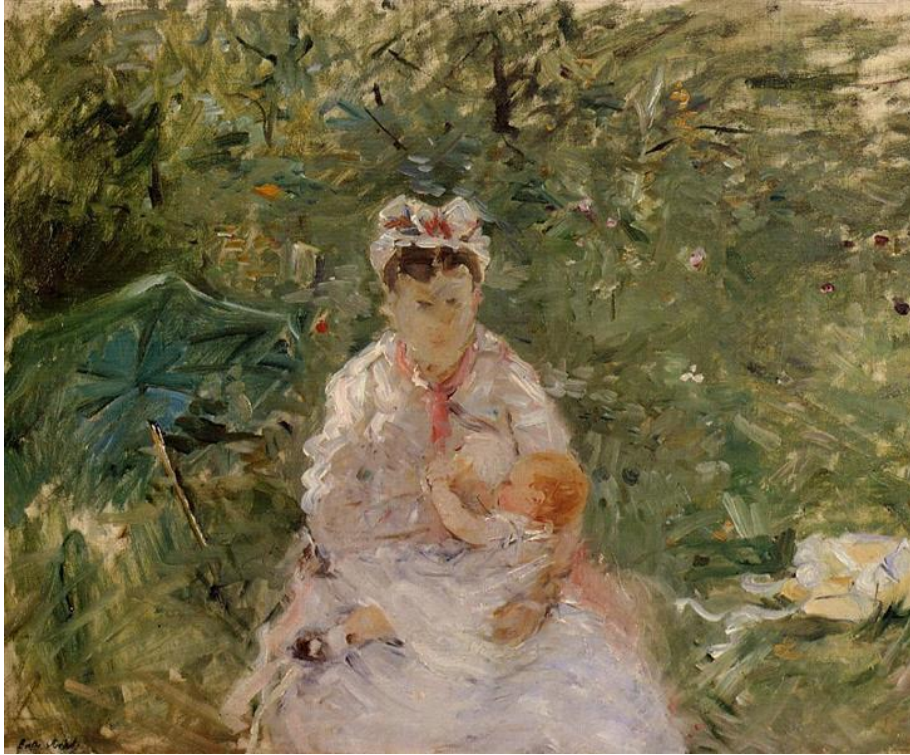


Figure 4: Berthe Morisot, *The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet*, 1880





Figure 5: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Maternity*, 1885