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From the Breast: An Appreciation

Patricia Lennox

'I gave him suck' -- A mother's anguished cry in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582). The grieving Isabella is lamenting the murder of her grown son, Horatio. This reference to breastfeeding was clearly meant for dramatic effect. These are her final lines before committing suicide:

And with this weapon will I wound the breast,
[*She stabs herself*]
The hapless breast that gave Horatio suck. (4.2)¹ 1

On 12 May 2023, I participated in the culminating workshop for the seminar series *From the Breast: Interpretations and Representations of Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding in Pre-Modern Cultures*. Months later, when I came across Kyd's words their impact was a confirmation of the workshop's on-going influence on my own research. The following 'Appreciation' is a thank you note to the organisers of *From the Breast*: Cannon Fairbairn, Agni Agathi Papamichael (University of Birmingham), and Ambika Raja (University of Warwick). The seminar and workshop presented a balanced and exciting combination of information centred on the a-historical centrality of breastfeeding, making it clear how deeply embedded it was in early modern culture. The hybrid seminars, the workshop papers, roundtable discussions, and conversations covered a wide swath of time and place, weaving many strands, ancient and modern, into a single tapestry.

My participation in the workshop was based on a current project, exploring the history of pregnancy costume designs in productions of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. It was also a chance to consider Shakespeare's references to breastfeeding. With *From the Breast* came my deeper realisation of how Shakespeare's writing is rich in references to pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. For example, *The Winter's Tale* is the play where he is most concerned with the effect of a pregnancy, but it also has a crucial reference to breastfeeding. Even more significant

¹ Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy*, in J.R. Mulryne and Andrew Gurr (eds.). London: Methuen Drama, 2009, p. 13.

are the references to nursing or 'giving suck' in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth*.² One of my major links between *From the Breast* and Shakespeare came about when workshop participants were asked to identify a single image that summed up their topic. The following is a series of snapshots, three images that brought to mind Shakespeare's work: an eighteenth-century satirical drawing, a fourteenth-century contract for a wet nurse, and a photo collage of contemporary mothers nursing infants.

First Snapshot: Sarah Fox (University of Birmingham) submitted *The fashionable mama*, a satirical drawing by James Gillray (London, 1776). Gillray's nursing mother is elaborately dressed to go out, perhaps to meet the gallant standing outside her window. Even her plumed headdress is in place. She is bored and ignores the baby. A maid stands beside her holding the baby to the mother's breast, careful to not disarrange the fashionable clothes. On the wall, in contrast, there is a picture of a loving mother in an earlier time cradling a nursing baby.

Gillray's attack is on fashion, but this image brought to mind the early modern debate over the benefits of a mother's milk over that of a wet nurse. It was argued that a mother's milk was superior because it protected the child from possible unsavoury influences transmitted through the nurse's milk. *The Winter's Tale* has a reference to this. An insanely jealous husband attacks his innocent wife, accusing her of being pregnant from an adulterous affair. In his barrage of ugly accusations, he demands she hand over their young son, who is beside her, saying: '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 (2.1.57-9)

Second Snapshot: Rebecca Winer (Villanova University) submitted an image she titled: 'Latin Notary's Contract in which Jewish Father Hires a Wet Nurse (Barcelona, 1386)'. This is one of the twenty-nine contracts she has found for wet nurses and is typical in the details of the transaction, which include length of employment (a year and a half) some indication of salary (an advance of 66 sous), arrangements for the

² All Shakespeare quotations from *The Oxford Shakespeare; The Complete Works*, 2nd ed. (2005). Stanley Wells, et al (eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

nurse's food and housing. This is a notarised legal document found in a notarial register and signed by the wet nurse and her male employer. It even specifies a fine if the nurse leaves employment before the end of her contract.

The Shakespeare connection here is strong: Juliet's Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the play Juliet, soon to turn fourteen, loves this affectionate woman who remained a member of the household after nursing ended. The Nurse is garrulous, coarse and fond of repeating stories of her and little Juliet. We hear her tell, at length, one of her favourites about the weaning of three-year-old 'Jule'. Details include an application of wormwood to her 'dug', the child's 'tetchy' reaction to its bitterness and how she 'fell out' with the dug (1.2.22-34).

Third Snapshot: Lisa Creagh submitted a photo montage of a dozen portraits of attractive, contemporary mothers breastfeeding. The Shakespeare connection here is to *Macbeth* and Sinead Cusak's experience when she played Lady Macbeth at the Royal Shakespeare Company (1986). It was a production that foregrounded the loss or absence of children, starting with the opening scene where a bloodied baby was removed from under a corpse on the battlefield. Cusak had recently given birth, and had warned the director, Adrian Noble, that she might have trouble with some things in the play. There was a particular problem with Lady Macbeth's speech trying to convince her husband to go through with their plan to murder King Duncan. Lady Macbeth's argument is ruthless:

. . . 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. (1.7.55-59)

Even Cusak was surprised by the revulsion she experienced. Every time she came to that line 'I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis [...]' she couldn't say it, especially, she said, 'not while I was nursing my own baby.' (Rutter 54).³ Even with her

³ Rutter, Carol (1988), *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*. London: The Women's Press.

years of professional experience, it took a long time in rehearsal to be able to do the speech in performance. Years later she still found she could not say it.

Fourth Snapshot: an image in words by Shakespeare (London, 1606). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Egyptian queen commits suicide by the bite of an asp smuggled to her by a servant. Shakespeare writes it as a breastfeeding scene. When Cleopatra holds the asp to her breast, Charmian, her lady in waiting, protests. The queen soothes her: 'Peace, peace. / Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?' (5.2.302-04). The image of breastfeeding is Shakespeare's invention. Plutarch, his major source for the play, describes the asp, but never places it near the breast. In performances much has been made by actors of caressing the asp-baby to make the nursing and dying even more emphatic.

The organisers of *From the Breast* started with a question built around an absence. In their research into the pre-modern world (much of it the ancient world) they questioned the absence of images and references to breastfeeding. They found that these were there but had been overlooked or not correctly identified or interpreted. Once you begin to notice it, breastfeeding keeps turning up, even in unexpected places. This includes the Christmas carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter', with words by Christina Rossetti. The third stanza specifies that the things that are enough to make the baby Jesus comfortable are 'a breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay'. How could one not be appreciative of the *From the Breast* workshop.

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