Pregnancy and childbirth posed significant challenges to the idealized images of motherhood that began to emerge in the eighteenth century. The implications of sexuality, pain and danger, and the simple messiness of the physical body seemed to contradict the increasingly powerful cultural vision of motherhood as primarily a moral and emotional role. The imagined figure of the sentimental mother was defined by her virtue, her piety, and her tender maternal affections, a vision that left little space for exploring the challenges posed by the reproductive body. Physicians struggled to reconcile their encounters with the maternal body with notions of female virtue and delicacy, while childbearing women themselves confronted the tensions between their emotional and physical lives as mothers. The issue of breastfeeding, however, provided a unique context in which some of these tensions could be worked out by prescriptive writers who created an ideological realm in which the maternal body and maternal virtue merged around the act of breastfeeding. By the end of the eighteenth century breastfeeding came to be idealized as the sentimental mother’s greatest joy and pleasure, fostering a vision of motherhood that erased more problematic aspects of the maternal body and replaced them with a celebration of the nursing mother as the epitome of female virtue and moral influence.

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the appearance of a significant volume of advice literature intended to instruct women in the art of childrearing. Both practical and ideological in nature, these texts provided detailed advice on infant care while also offering interpretations of the moral and emotional duties of mothers. Breastfeeding figured prominently in these discussions both as a topic that demanded practical advice and as a primary ideological vehicle for articulating the attributes of the sentimental mother. Most of these advice manuals were written by British authors and were then circulated in America, shaping a rich transatlantic
discourse on the nature and responsibilities of motherhood. The majority of these early advice manuals were written by physicians and the occasional minister, though a handful of treatises by female midwives or mothers also appeared. By the nineteenth century American physicians and moralists began to produce their own body of advice literature for mothers, and it was also at this time that significant numbers of women began to put their ideas and expertise as mothers into print in advice manuals and shorter didactic writings for women's magazines, combining practical advice for childrearing with a deeply sentimental appeal to the shared experiences of motherhood.²

In their discussions of breastfeeding, prescriptive authors generally agreed that infants should be nursed by their mothers rather than be suckled by a wet nurse or fed by hand. Two primary types of argumentation in favor of maternal breastfeeding emerged in this advice literature. Eighteenth-century authors primarily sought to persuade mothers to breastfeed their own children by emphasizing the benefits of nursing for infant and maternal health, by levying harsh criticism against women who failed to nurse, and by offering practical advice to help women manage nursing. A second strain of argumentation also tentatively emerged that emphasized maternal breastfeeding as a physically and emotionally pleasurable experience for women. By the end of the eighteenth century, prescriptive writers began to place greater emphasis on maternal pleasure as their primary argument in favor of breastfeeding. By shaping their discussions of breastfeeding around images of physical and emotional pleasure, advice manual authors transformed the messiness and danger of the maternal body and reimagined the maternal breast as the locus of sensibility, sentiment, and maternal virtue.

Breastfeeding provided a unique context in which the maternal body could be presented as neither frightening nor disruptive. Representations of the breast as the principal site of maternal and familial pleasure simplified and refined the complexity of the female body, resulting in a narrowly idealized space in which maternal corporeality could be safely celebrated. Of course, in real life breastfeeding could be physically difficult and disruptive. Lactating breasts leaked fluid, an unavoidable reminder of unrestrained corporeality. More devastatingly, breastfeeding could lead to excruciating conditions such as abscesses and cracked nipples. For many mothers there was little that was ideal about the daily practice of breastfeeding, though they understood its importance as one of their maternal
duties. But women’s lived experiences did not diminish the fact that breast-feeding became a primary symbol of the good mother. As the Scottish physician and popular medical writer William Buchan effused, “In the language of love, women are called angels; but it is a weak and a silly compliment; they approach nearer to our ideas of the Deity: they not only create, but sustain their creation, and hold its future destiny in their hands” (emphasis mine). Breastfeeding represented the pinnacle of maternal virtue and influence, and in this context the problematic maternal body was made to disappear in favor of an idealized vision of the wholesome maternal breast.

As sentimental images of maternal pleasure came to the forefront in discussions of breastfeeding, they created a picture of motherhood as effort- less and delightful, a role that women fulfilled naturally. Though women’s personal testimonies revealed the diligence and fatigue involved in breast-feeding an infant for twelve months or more and the complications that could arise throughout the process, prescriptive authors (while occasionally acknowledging the practical challenges facing nursing mothers) evoked the sense that breastfeeding was not work, but pure delight. The sentimental mother was inherently tender, affectionate, and dutiful, therefore she could experience no greater pleasure than in suckling her infant. Moreover, depictions of the nursing mother suggested that the broader work of raising a virtuous child was mainly accomplished by maternal influence rather than the labors of the mother. By breastfeeding, the sentimental mother imbued her child with virtue and piety, thus solidifying the infant’s future as a virtuous citizen and a pious Christian. The complicated physical, intellectual, and emotional work of childrearing was time and again reduced to a single act—an intimate physical connection—that filled both mother and child with delight and led them together down the path of virtue.

The idealization of breastfeeding in prescriptive literature emerged in the context of a growing emphasis on motherhood and domesticity in eighteenth-century literary and intellectual life. Enlightenment-era discus- sions of virtue and men’s and women’s respective roles in society led to a new view that the essence of womanly virtue was to be found in the figure of the sentimental mother. In this period sentimentalism came to define a new understanding of virtue and influence in which emotions were seen as a force for good in human life. Prior to this, women had been perceived to be driven by passion, excessively sensitive, and therefore lacking in reason,
but in the eighteenth century emotion came to be viewed positively as a force for moral and social good. Women thus gained a unique claim to moral power and influence. Although the Enlightenment took different forms in France, Britain, and America due to their respective political and cultural contexts, sentimentalism was a common denominator in political, social, and cultural life. Enlightenment thinkers, whose writings traveled across the Channel and across the Atlantic, saw feelings such as compassion and sympathy as natural and inherent to human nature and as the necessary foundation for a virtuous society. Sensibility, the acute physical and emotional ability to feel (pain, pleasure, sorrow, joy) and to empathize with the feelings of others, was a corollary to sentimentalism. These concepts were particularly important in America in the late eighteenth century as a component of nation-building in the new republic, for sentiment, sensibility, and sympathy were seen as the emotional glue that bound Americans together as part of a single virtuous community.

Sentimentalism and sensibility permeated political and philosophical discourse in Europe and America, and it also found its way into the popular literature and culture of the eighteenth century. The English author Samuel Richardson's best-selling novel *Pamela*, for instance, was first published in 1740–41 and illustrated the importance of sentiment and sensibility in expressing and sustaining feminine virtue. Richardson located virtue in the simplicity, sincerity, and sensitivity of the young Pamela's emotions, while he explored Mr. B.'s evolution from a man of base passions to a man of wholesome sentiment. More importantly for this discussion, *Pamela* was one of the first widely read literary texts to locate female virtue in maternal sentiment and sensibility. Popular in England and America and on the Continent from the 1740s on, the novel anticipated an emerging understanding of motherhood as women's principal contribution to society and a growing perception that women were especially defined by their sentimental nature and extreme sensibility. Two decades later, a similar conception of motherhood was articulated by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his popular and highly influential work *Emile*, which highlighted the mother's unique moral duty to her children and to society. As Rousseau wrote, “When mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens for the state.” This notion of moral motherhood gained particular prominence in America during the Revolution and became increasingly significant with the formation of the republic as writers began to draw
a connection between the virtuous citizenry necessary for a stable republic and the moral influence of mothers. As Margaret Cox explained in her writings on motherhood, “To American mothers . . . is then committed, in a special manner, the solemn responsibility of watching over the hearts and minds of our youthful citizens, who are soon to take their places on the public arena.”

Women were understood to possess a special aptitude for personal Christian virtues that made them particularly suitable for raising children and creating a wholesome home environment, while men were seen as better suited for the public virtues of service to the state and patriotic self-sacrifice.

The Enlightenment was not the only source of new ideas about motherhood and women’s social roles. Evangelical Christianity in both England and America supplied a new emphasis on emotion, female piety, and motherhood that began to emerge during the religious revivals of the eighteenth century and flowered more fully in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The notion of female influence, particularly in the context of motherhood, became central to religious rhetoric, granting women a significant claim to moral authority within the family, the church, and society.

Ruth Bloch has suggested that this Christian vision of female and maternal influence most likely enjoyed even broader popular support than Enlightenment ideas, for evangelical and nonevangelical Protestants alike adopted the ideal of the tender and moral mother whose Christian influence would transform the domestic sphere, and eventually society at large, into a haven of piety. As the American minister, historian, and prescriptive writer John Abbott intoned: “O mothers! Reflect upon the power your Maker has placed in your hands. There is no earthly influence to be compared with yours. There is no combination of causes so powerful, in promoting the happiness or the misery of our race, as the instructions of home. In a most peculiar sense, God has constituted you the guardians and the controllers of the human family.” Although this Protestant vision of women’s moral authority, particularly as mothers, differed from Enlightenment discussions of motherhood in that it deemphasized reason in favor of piety, both visions highlighted the importance of sentiment and sensibility in describing and enacting motherhood. It was the sentimental mother’s ability to be physically and emotionally attuned to her child that granted her unmatched influence over its character. More specifically, many prescriptive writers suggested that virtue was literally passed from mother to child via breast milk, making maternal breastfeeding essential to good mothering. Thus the sentimental mother was defined by her virtue, by her ability to feel deeply...
as a mother, and by her ability to create an emotional bond with her child that would fundamentally shape its character.

Discussions of breastfeeding provided prescriptive writers with a particularly compelling context in which to develop and explore the core attributes of the sentimental mother. It was in the act of breastfeeding that her sentimental nature and her sensibility appeared most clearly. But this vision of the sentimental mother did not emerge immediately in the maternal advice literature of the eighteenth century. Early authors of maternal advice manuals agreed that breastfeeding was a central duty for responsible mothers, but they focused more on moral and pragmatic arguments in favor of maternal nursing than on sentimental rhetoric. They represented motherhood as a natural and instinctive role, but in spite of this characterization these early authors mistrusted women’s ability and willingness to perform it. Nature made women mothers, yet some women evidently did not know how to mother properly. As one physician insisted, women lacked a “Philosophic Knowledge of Nature, to be acquired only by learned Observation and Experience, and which therefore the Unlearned must be incapable of.”

In this view, women were uneducated in natural philosophy and other profound subjects generally reserved for the consideration of men, therefore they needed to be taught and supervised by men in order to ensure proper maternal devotion and correct parenting practices. Mixing criticism with hints of sentimentalism, early prescriptive authors wrote manuals to correct, educate, and encourage mothers.

Eighteenth-century prescriptive authors shaped their arguments in favor of maternal breastfeeding in a practical vein by emphasizing the health benefits of nursing for both mother and child. Medical writers in particular insisted that mother’s milk was the only natural, and therefore wholesome, food for infants. As the British surgeon William Moss wrote in the 1780s, “There can be no doubt that the mother’s milk is the only sustenance nature has designed for an infant at birth.” The English physician William Cadogan served as the governor of the London Foundling Hospital in the 1750s and was particularly concerned about what he perceived as dangerously low rates of maternal breastfeeding. His text on childrearing was one of the first and most influential of such texts, and it circulated in numerous editions in both England and America in the mid- and late eighteenth century. He was particularly concerned by high rates of infant mortality and saw maternal breastfeeding as the solution to the problem. Asserting that the mothers and infants of the working classes enjoyed better health because
they could not afford to hire wet nurses, Cadogan made his case for maternal breastfeeding by emphasizing that the key to maternal and infant health lay in the respect of nature. “If we follow Nature, instead of leading or driving it,” he insisted, “we cannot err. In the Business of nursing, as well as Physick, Art is ever destructive.”

Artificial methods of infant feeding flouted the laws of nature and therefore ruined health. Cadogan also made his case for maternal breastfeeding by identifying it as essential to good maternal health: “If she be a healthy Woman, it will confirm her Health; if weakly, in most Cases it will restore her.” Moreover, he insisted that breastfeeding provided a cure for the psychological disturbances that he believed sometimes accompanied childbearing: “The Mother would likewise, in most hysterical nervous cases, establish her own health by it . . . as well as that of her offspring.”

The British physician Hugh Smith, writing in the 1760s, was likewise concerned with high rates of infant mortality and explained that those who suckled their own infants had greater success than those who hired nurses or fed by hand, for “nature is always preferable to art.” Moreover, he insisted that mothers who failed to breastfeed were more likely to suffer from fever, tumors, breast cancer, asthma, and other serious health problems. On the other hand, he claimed, “Many instances have I known of weakly and delicate women, who, at my particular request, have suckled their children, and thereby obtained a much better state of health.”

These arguments about infant and maternal health were apparently so common that the British physician Alexander Hamilton, writing in the 1780s, concluded that “the important advantages derived from Nursing, both to the mother and child, are so universally known, that it would be needless, in this place, to give a detail of them.”

Early advice writers also based their arguments in favor of maternal breastfeeding on notions of moral duty and natural law. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau complained, “Since mothers have despised their first duty and refused to nurse their own children, they have had to be entrusted to hired nurses.” These writers criticized women for thwarting their God-given duty by refusing to nurse and stressed how essential this practice was. Hugh Smith described breastfeeding as the “first great trust which is reposed in them” and complained that humans were the only animals that abused natural law by refusing to nurse their young. Moreover, he asserted that “nothing but a strange perversion of human nature could first deprive children of their mothers milk.”

The Nurse’s Guide, an advice manual published in England in the early eighteenth century, emphasized that “the Duty of a Mother does not consist in conceiving, or bringing a Child into
The first essential step in bringing up a child was to breastfeed it, and the author insisted that “every Mother that is in perfect Health ought to nurse her own Children herself, because she will be sure to take more Care of them than a Nurse. . . . Nay, further, a Mother will not fail to instruct and bring up her Child every Way better than a Country-Nurse can possibly do, who is very often given to Drinking, and all Sorts of Vice.”

Not only were mothers presumed to be more diligent caregivers than hired nurses, but prescriptive authors also assumed that only a good mother (that is, one who was not tainted by the presumed vices of poverty and ignorance) could transmit appropriate moral values via her breast milk. Mothers who failed in this duty were severely criticized based on the belief that “a Woman must be very unnatural, who can part with her own Child.”

Prescriptive authors particularly vilified elite mothers for their alleged inattention to sacred maternal duty. As Alexander Hamilton asserted, “Women are to be considered but as half mothers who wantonly abandon their children as soon as born.” These writers believed that elite women were perpetually out paying calls, enhancing their wardrobes, going to parties, and attending the theater rather than remaining in the nursery to watch over their children. Sophia Hume, an early American religious writer, complained that fashionable women declined to breastfeed for the most frivolous reasons. For fear that breastfeeding might “prevent some little Delicacy in our Shape or Dress, or detain us from making unedifying and impertinent Visits, etc. we consign the poor Innocent into the Hands of a Stranger, to be foster’d by Women, often-times, of savage Tempers, and vile Affections.”

Prescriptive writers harped on the neglectful tendencies of elite mothers, who in England did in fact often send their children to be wet-nursed in the countryside throughout the eighteenth century. “Compare the opulent with the rustic,” Hugh Smith urged his readers, “the success is still exceedingly different. How many children of the great fall victim to prevailing customs, the effects of riches! How many of the poor are saved by wanting these luxuries!”

One midwifery textbook suggested that practitioners issue vague threats about the greater prevalence of breast cancer in women who did not breastfeed in order to convince their elite patients to do their maternal duty. Although these authors were openly critical of elite women, viewing them as selfish and frivolous, their criticisms implicitly acknowledged that breastfeeding was hard work. Nursing a child for twelve months or more required time, diligence, physical effort, and a degree of knowledge and skill. The commitment of so much time and
energy would necessarily interfere with women’s ability to accomplish other activities, frivolous or otherwise.

While criticizing elite mothers for neglect, prescriptive authors also romanticized the natural mothering they imagined prevailed in the more rustic homes of country folk and among the working classes. In their estimation, these were women who were not afraid of work and whose limited resources demanded that they use their own bodies to accomplish the labor of childrearing. William Cadogan insisted that “the Mother who has only a few Rags to cover her child loosely, and little more than her own Breast to feed it, sees it healthy and strong . . . while the puny Insect, the Heir and Hope of a rich Family lies languishing under a Load of Finery . . . abhoring and rejecting the Dainties he is crammed with, till he dies a Victim to the mistaken Care and Tenderness of his fond Mother.”33 Such remarks revealed a common contradiction in maternal advice literature regarding the convergence of good mothering and socioeconomic class. On the one hand, writers argued that elite women should not consign their infants to the care of working-class women, whose bad morals and uncouth ways made them unfit to nurse. In particular, they worried about the dangerous effects of wet nurses, whose “savage Tempers, and vile Affections” they feared would corrupt the constitutions and morals of the infants in their charge.34 On the other hand, in the same breath these writers vilified elite mothers as unnatural and incompetent and praised the wholesome mothering that took place among working-class women. These prescriptive writers saw good mothering as occurring only within very specific circumstances. The elite mother’s dissipated lifestyle made her a poor nurse and therefore a neglectful or at best incompetent mother. The poor woman who sold her milk out of economic necessity was likewise a monster, damaging her own infant by neglect and corrupting the infant she was hired to nurse with her bad morals and diseased milk. As Rousseau insisted, “The woman who nurses another’s child in place of her own is a bad mother; how can she be a good nurse?”35 Thus it seemed that only women who occupied the vague middle ground between fashionable excess and economic deprivation could possibly embody the perfect mother. It is perhaps not surprising, given the rising prominence of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century England and America, that prescriptive authors tended to elevate the virtues of middle-class women over the extremes of either poverty or wealth.

In addition to criticizing mothers and emphasizing the healthful effects of breastfeeding, early and mid-eighteenth-century advice manual authors
began to hint at the concept of pleasure that was to become a central method of persuasion by the end of the eighteenth century. The author of *The Nurse's Guide* acknowledged that “there is a considerable deal of Trouble to be undergone in the bringing up of a Child,” but insisted that the “trouble is sweeten’d and rewarded by a Pleasure and Satisfaction not to be conceiv’d.”

The author summarized four key arguments in favor of maternal nursing: first, by breastfeeding mothers provided their infants with both nutritious milk and good morals; second, by breastfeeding mothers created a lasting sense of obligation and duty on the part of their children; third, breastfeeding was women’s duty; and fourth, the good mother should breastfeed “because she is thereby put into a Capacity of receiving the greatest Pleasure and Satisfaction in the World.” Pleasure was not the first argument in this author’s arsenal, but it was emphatically expressed. William Cadogan, writing at midcentury, explained that women who refused to nurse their children did not understand that “were it rightly managed, there would be much Pleasure in it.”

Hugh Smith’s 1767 manual perhaps best represented the transition toward a greater focus on pleasure and sentiment in advice literature for mothers. Although writing as a medical authority, Smith eschewed medicalized discussions of breastfeeding and focused instead on highly moral and sentimental discussions of women’s duties as mothers. He evoked an emotional understanding of pleasure when he worried that the few women who were physically unable to nurse were “thus deprived of a happiness, only known to those who enjoy it.”

These authors illustrated the transitional nature of ideas of motherhood in this period. They combined a pragmatic approach in their arguments in favor of maternal breastfeeding with a modest dose of sentimental rhetoric that emphasized that maternal virtue would be rewarded by pleasure and delight.

Prescriptive authors writing at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century deployed some of the same practical arguments as their earlier counterparts. They insisted that breastfeeding was crucial for both infant and maternal health. The English midwife Martha Mears, writing in the 1790s, argued that nature made the mother’s “health and happiness, and very often her life dependent on the discharge of this most sacred of all duties.”

The well-known medical writer William Buchan claimed in his 1803 text that failure to breastfeed would result in “a great degree of fever in the whole system” and was dangerous to the mother, while the midwife Mary Watkins asserted that “fewer women die while they are nursing, than at any equal period of their lives.” These later authors also emphasized women's moral duty to breastfeed. Mrs. Dawbarn, for instance,
insisted that when a woman becomes a mother “it will be her indispens-
able duty to suckle her child, if she be able, for it is nature’s law, and cannot
be violated without injury to both mother and child.” The English writer
Louisa Barwell agreed, writing that breastfeeding “is a duty which may be
attended with some degree of inconvenience; but this is amply compen-
sated in the delightful feelings which are developed in the course of the
nursing period, and the consciousness of performing a duty of the greatest
importance to one in whom she feels the deepest interest.” Like their
earlier counterparts, these writers were also critical of women, believing
that the ability and desire to breastfeed was a part of human nature that
had been corrupted by fashion. As one early nineteenth-century author
exclaimed, “How dead to the finest feelings of our nature must that mother
be who can voluntarily banish her infant from her bosom, and thus forego
the exquisite delight attending the first development of its rational facul-
ties. O fashion! Arbitrary tyrant, of what hours of heartfelt bliss dost thou
deprive thy votary.” Similarly, the British minister Thomas Searle la-
mented the fact that some women gave up breastfeeding in favor of frivo-
rous pastimes: “But alas! there are some, who, without any reason but their
own indolence, the indulgence in other scenes and occupations, unnatu-
really assign the care of their infants to other hands.” The American re-
former and physician William Alcott asserted with horror that “there are
some mothers who seem to have a perfect hatred of children; and if they
can find any plausible apology for neglecting to nurse them, they will.”
Like their predecessors, such authors were certain that women who
neglected to breastfeed must be unnatural mothers and were deserving of
chastisement. As the prominent American physician William Dewees pro-
claimed in his 1825 guide to childrearing, those “women who may stifle
this strong maternal yearning . . . have ever been the subject of the sati-
rist’s lash, and the object of the moralist’s declamation.” These authors
assumed that breastfeeding was natural and instinctual, and mothers who
failed to breastfeed were therefore monstrous and unnatural.

Alongside these long-standing arguments, criticisms, and practical hints,
later prescriptive writers also developed a vision of motherhood that em-
phasized the sentiment and sensibility of the ideal mother. As one author
pointed out, mothers who refused to breastfeed displayed a “most shame-
ful degree of selfishness and unnatural insensitivity.” To be sensible was
to be a good mother—to be insensible was an affront to female virtue. It is
important to note that by the nineteenth century an increasing number of
maternal advice manuals and magazine articles for mothers were being pub-
lished by women and nonmedical men (often ministers and reformers), which could provide a possible explanation for the shift away from more pragmatic arguments in favor of maternal breastfeeding toward a more sentimental framework. Yet nineteenth-century medical writers frequently used the same kinds of sentimental language and moral arguments as laypeople, suggesting that the vision of breastfeeding as a crucial part of sentimental motherhood was a widely accepted framework. As William Dewees expressed it, “God has declared almost in every part of his living creation, that the female, for a certain time, is the natural protector of her offspring; to the human female he has been particularly emphatic, implanting in her affections, which are rarely subdued; and by giving her an organization most wonderfully fitted for the exercise of her best and most enviable feelings.”

Although his interest in maternal and infant health was ostensibly medical, Dewees framed his advice in sentimental terms, emphasizing the strength and purity of maternal feeling in language that was similar to that of prescriptive writers coming from a nonmedical background.

In the context of this sentimental vision of motherhood, the language of pleasure became a primary vehicle for promoting maternal breastfeeding. Advice manual authors regularly evoked the emotional pleasure of the good mother as she suckled her child. The midwife Mary Watkins suggested that one of the consequences of women failing to nurse their children was that “the mother is deprived of a very high source of pleasure, of the most tender and endearing kind, which also remarkably strengthens her attachment to the infant of her bosom.”

William Buchan mingled criticism and sentimentalism when he argued that nursing was “an obligation so strongly enforced by nature, that no woman can evade the performance of it with impunity. But cheerful obedience to this sovereign law is attended with the sweetest pleasures of which the human heart is susceptible.”

The American physician Thomas Ewell similarly evoked the naturalness of the desire to breastfeed when he wondered “how any woman could be so lost to the feelings of nature, as to give up the pleasure of this undertaking.” In his view, women’s feelings were naturally maternal, and therefore they found their greatest fulfillment in nursing their infants. The beloved American writer Lydia Sigourney exhorted women to fulfill their natural role in order to bask in the joys of motherhood: “Were I to define the climax of happiness which a mother enjoys with her infant, I should by no means limit it to the first three months. The whole season while it is deriving nutriment from her, is one of peculiar, inexpressible felicity. Dear friends, be not anxious to abridge this halcyon period. Do not willingly deprive yourselves of
any portion of the highest pleasure of which woman's nature is capable.” This was high praise for breastfeeding indeed. Sigourney placed the experience of nursing at the center of women’s happiness and encouraged mothers to embrace and extend this source of joy.

By highlighting pleasure as an inherent part of nursing, proponents of maternal breastfeeding naturalized a portrait of the sentimental mother whose happiness depended on an intimate physical connection with her infant. In their view, breastfeeding was natural, instinctual, and a profound source of pleasure and happiness. If breastfeeding was a mother’s first and most important duty, it also guaranteed that motherhood would be defined by delight rather than by toil and difficulty. John Abbott summarized this view by asserting that “the human heart is not susceptible of more exquisite pleasures than those which the parental relation affords. Is there no joy when the mother first presses her infant to her heart? Is there no delight in witnessing the first placid smile which plays upon its cheek? Yes! The very earliest infancy of the babe brings ‘rapture a mother only knows.’ The very care is a delight.”

Abbott’s enthusiastic description of maternal joy suggested that the act of mothering was most profoundly defined by rapture. These representations of maternal pleasure culminated in an emphasis on the physical mother-child bond, for only by nursing, cradling, and embracing a child could a woman be a true mother. As one author noted, “Happy the mother who can suckle her infant; she who has not the power to do so is deprived of one of the greatest maternal pleasures, while her toils and anxieties are more than doubled.” This author acknowledged the challenges of childcare, but viewed the physical ability to breastfeed as not only pleasurable but also an escape from childcare difficulties. William Buchan emphasized that the mother who could not breastfeed “is to be pitied in being thus deprived of the greatest pleasure of life, the pleasure of feeding and rearing her own offspring.” Prescriptive authors delighted in describing the intimate physical connection between mother and child, made more potent by the sensibility of the good mother. William Dewees focused his discussions primarily on the physical pleasure of the fond mother and insisted that she “must not delegate to any being the sacred and delightful task of suckling her child.” These depictions also revealed that women’s pleasure in nursing was not merely emotional—the joy of fulfilling a sacred duty—but also a fundamentally physical sensation of delight and satisfaction resulting from the act of nursing. As one woman wrote in 1805, “What
a delightful employment it is to *suckle a beloved child*, who repays the kindness it receives with the sweetest caresses!"⁵⁸ If pleasure was an inherent part of nursing, then good mothering must be by definition a pleasurable experience. A popular women’s magazine corroborated this idea in a sketch of the ideal mother: “She takes her child to her breast, and imparts that nourishment which the Creator has designed for its sustenance; and in so doing she is conscious of a new principle of delight, physically and morally. The turbulence of love is past, and she has now that tranquil enjoyment best adapted to her health and her moral and intellectual growth."⁵⁹ In obeying the dictates of God and nature, the good mother derived a new form of joy that permeated her body and spirit. No longer tossed about by the passions of romantic love, she attained the highest state of womanhood and could enjoy the physical and emotional pleasures of maternity.

In spite of the overwhelming emphasis on pleasure, prescriptive authors occasionally acknowledged that breastfeeding could involve discomfort and difficulty. The body of the nursing mother was not always as cooperative in life as it was on paper. The physician Thomas Bull explained that “the period of suckling is generally one of the most healthy of a woman’s life. But there are exceptions to this; and nursing, instead of being accompanied by health, may be the cause of its being materially, even fatally, impaired.” The problem, he argued, was not breastfeeding itself, but continuing to breastfeed too long or when the mother was too weak.⁶⁰ Tackling the issue of pain, American mother Ann Allen described breastfeeding as “a pleasing, although a painful sensation,” but urged women not to be deterred, for, “if you would be a happy mother . . . be a faithful mother, and you will be rewarded daily.”⁶¹ William Dewees, whose text contained an entire section on breastfeeding “as a pleasure,” referred briefly to the “fatigue and anxiety of nursing,” indicating that breastfeeding might be more complicated than his other glowing depictions suggested. Fortunately, he stressed, these challenges would be overcome by the deep affection of the good mother for her offspring.⁶² The popular domestic author Catharine Beecher asserted grimly that “many a mother will testify, with shuddering, that the most exquisite sufferings she ever endured, were not those appointed by Nature, but those, which, for week after week, have worn down health and spirits, when nourishing her child.”⁶³ The pangs of childbirth were natural and of short duration, she suggested, but there was something particularly terrible about the experience of unnecessary suffering while breastfeeding. Even William Buchan, who rapturously promoted the pleasures of
breastfeeding, acknowledged the possibility of discomfort. But, he argued optimistically, “a little pain is easily surmounted, and is followed by lasting pleasure.” Pleasure and pain converged in the maternal breast, signifying that mothering represented both a sacrifice and a peculiar privilege for women. More importantly, perhaps, these texts assured women who persevered in spite of pain or difficulty that they had attained the height of maternal virtue; pain was of little consequence when good mothering guaranteed lasting rewards.

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century depictions of breastfeeding as a pleasure contributed to a widespread vision of the good mother as a figure of sentiment and sensibility. She was compelled to breastfeed by her natural maternal affection and by a sense of moral duty, and her experience of breastfeeding was defined by extreme emotional and physical sensibility. In effect, these visions of the nursing mother transformed the messy and troublesome body—the one that might suffer breast infections, cracked nipples, fatigue, or poor milk supply—into a refined source of moral and emotional influence. A verse in a poem by Lydia Sigourney suggested how the physical work of the maternal body was reimagined as emotional labor. In her poem the voice of God spoke to a mother, telling her that “thou hast a tender flower/ Upon thy breast—fed with the dews of love.” Here the nourishing properties of breast milk were transformed into the more ethereal “dews of love.” The physical link that breastfeeding created between mother and child was elevated far above a merely nutritional transaction. Moreover, these idealized depictions of nursing mothers defined the work of mothering as effortless and natural. As Lydia Sigourney illustrated in her Letters to Mothers, the maternal role came as naturally to women as the growth of beautiful plants in a natural setting: “You are sitting with your child in your arms. So am I. And I have never been as happy before. Have you? How this new affection seems to spread a soft, fresh green over the soul. Does not the whole heart blossom thick with plants of hope, sparkling with perpetual dew-drops? What a loss, had we passed through the world without tasting this purest, most exquisite fount of love.” The botanic images in Sigourney’s portrait of maternal bliss emphasized the naturalness of motherhood. Maternal happiness grew like woodland flowers, watered with fountains of love. Indeed, the phrase “fount of love” was a particularly apt metaphor, for the lactating breast was consistently described as abundant and fount-like, a site where, as William Cadogan wrote decades earlier, milk “is poured forth from an exuberant, overflowing Urn, by a bountiful Hand, that never provides sparingly.” Thus Sigourney’s emphasis on the
fount of maternal love also echoed images of the nursing mother who symbolized the height of maternal virtue, influence, and delight.

At the same time that late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prescriptive writers effused about the pleasures of maternal breastfeeding, they also developed a secondary and more provocative realm of imagery that raised the possibility of sexual pleasure centered on the act of breastfeeding. Historians of motherhood and breastfeeding have identified a long-standing cultural tension between visions of the maternal breast and the sexual breast in Western culture. As Ruth Perry has argued, in the eighteenth century “maternity came to be imagined as a counter to sexual feeling.” The good mother was too moral to be driven by sexual passions. More pragmatically, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it was believed that sexual intercourse was detrimental to the flow and quality of breast milk, so that abstinence was considered the appropriate choice for lactating mothers. In this view, sexual activity could literally damage a woman’s physical ability to be a good mother. Although this tension between the maternal and the sexual is well documented by scholars in many social and cultural contexts, descriptions of breastfeeding in maternal advice literature suggest a more complex picture of the relationship between motherhood and sexuality. In fact, I would argue that beginning in the late eighteenth century, prescriptive discussions of breastfeeding allowed the maternal and the sexual to converge in the breast of the sentimental mother. The pleasures of breastfeeding at times took on sensual and even erotic tones, connecting the joys of motherhood to a broader realm of erotic enjoyment and romantic love. Enthusiastic descriptions of pleasure in prescriptive literature located both maternal virtue and sensual pleasure in the act of breastfeeding, revealing a complex understanding of the relationship between maternity and sexuality.

Scholars have tended to treat motherhood and sexuality as separate phenomena with distinct histories, despite the obvious link between sex and childbearing. Perhaps one reason for this disinclination to consider sexuality and motherhood in tandem is our own cultural uneasiness with anything that allows for slippage between that which is maternal and that which is sexual. Americans today do not like to think simultaneously about motherhood and sex. Yet the body that gives birth and nourishes an infant may also be the body that experiences and creates desire, receives and gives pleasure. Another reason that it is so difficult to understand maternity and sexuality in tandem is that scholars have tended to cling to an understanding
of sexuality in terms of (primarily heterosexual) intercourse, without exploring the complex play of desires and sensations that constitute the human experience of sexuality. Focusing on evocations of sensual pleasure in discussions of breastfeeding brings motherhood and sexuality together and adds a new dimension to our understanding of the trope of sentimental motherhood that came to dominate American cultural visions of womanhood by the nineteenth century.

Scholarly debates about the history of sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveal a complex and often contradictory set of ideologies that emerged and coexisted in the period in question, making it difficult to clearly situate discussions of maternal pleasure in the broader context of sexual ideology. Just as scholars have shown that the period from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century was a transitional moment for ideas about motherhood, historians have argued that this period also saw changes in sexual ideology in European and American societies. Nancy Cott was one of the earliest scholars to posit a change in sexual ideology that began in the late eighteenth century in America. Prior to that period, women were defined as particularly lustful and driven by sexual passion, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century this view had all but vanished, and more weight was given to women’s moral nature, while their capacity for sexual desire was deemphasized by a rhetoric of “passionlessness.” Like Cott, many scholars have marked the beginning of the nineteenth century as a turning point in the history of sexuality in America, signaling a period of increased emphasis on restraint in sexual ideology and practice.

While there is good evidence for this interpretation, other scholars have rightly questioned what Michel Foucault has referred to as the “repressive hypothesis.” In his influential study of nineteenth-century bourgeois sexuality, Foucault has argued that rather than being an era of repression, the nineteenth century in fact saw a vast multiplication of sexual discourses, behaviors, and identities. More recent scholarship has followed Foucault’s lead and shifted from an emphasis on sexual ideology to a greater focus on diverse sexual practices and attitudes, revealing much greater openness and enthusiasm for sexuality than previously suspected. For instance, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s comprehensive survey of American sexualities argues that in the nineteenth century “the reproductive moorings of sexual experience gradually gave way to a new constellation of meanings, in which both love and intimacy became increasingly important.” As married couples began to exercise control over childbearing, sexuality came to
have a life of its own apart from reproduction, although women’s lives continued to be shaped by the work of childbearing and rearing. Moreover, D’Emilio and Freedman argue that “during courtship and in marriage, sexuality came to be more deeply associated with the emotion of love and the quest for interpersonal intimacy.” More recently, Karen Lystra has taken up the question of romantic love and sexual intimacy. Exploring the attitudes of women and men toward one another and toward love, marriage, and sex, Lystra argues that in the nineteenth century “both men and women saw sexual desire as the natural physical accompaniment and distillation of romantic love. . . . Under the right circumstances, sex might be viewed as a romantically inspired religious experience, a sacrament of love.” In this view, sex enhanced the affective bonds that were at the heart of the domestic sphere, suggesting that locating female sexual pleasure in the context of motherhood was not perhaps as anomalous as it might initially seem. Pleasures, both maternal and conjugal, could be seen as blending and merging to reinforce the strength of family bonds.

Thinking about motherhood and sexuality in tandem pushes us to think more flexibly about the category of sexuality and what we mean when we speak of sexual pleasure. Most adult women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not separate sexuality from motherhood in the way that we do in twenty-first century America, where the widespread availability of effective contraception has largely decoupled sex and parenthood. In earlier eras sexually active women almost invariably became mothers at some point, and women who survived until menopause spent a large percentage of their lives either pregnant or lactating. Their sexual lives were thus inextricably entwined with their experiences as mothers, a fact that should push us to examine what it meant to have a simultaneously maternal and sexual body. Kathryn Schwarz has signaled the need to view the maternal breast as a possible site for female sexual pleasure, in the context of the “erotic dyad of mother and child,” and, “still more disruptively,” to consider the ways in which “the eroticized maternal breast might always prove to be self-satisfying, self-contained in its economy of desire.” Her analysis suggests that it is important to read eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prescriptive discussions of breastfeeding with an eye toward the maternal breast as a locus of female pleasure while also considering it as a center for the pleasures of both infant and husband.

Advice manual writers linked women’s joy as mothers to the bodily experiences of maternity by portraying the mother-child bond created by
breastfeeding as a profoundly physical experience that provided the mother with sensual pleasure. By focusing on the physical sensations of breastfeeding, writers at times described nursing as a sensual and even erotic experience. Although these advice manuals were certainly not intended to be read as erotic texts, their descriptions of breastfeeding veered toward erotica, which Karen Harvey usefully defines as “material about sexual pleasure which depicted sex, bodies and desire through illusions of concealment and distance: bodies were represented through metaphor and suggestion, and depictions of sexual activity were characterized by deferral and silence”79 The concepts of suggestion, deferral, and silence are particularly useful here in considering the erotic in maternal advice literature. To notice in representations of breastfeeding the suggestion and deferral of sexual pleasure between husband and wife, the silence surrounding the possibilities of autonomous female pleasure centered on the breast, and the satiety of the nursing infant as a possible metaphor for or displacement of sexual satisfaction is to comprehend the enormously complex possibilities with respect to sexuality and motherhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

By the end of the eighteenth century, when the rhetoric of pleasure emerged in maternal advice manuals, there was already a well-established tradition of print erotica in English and American culture. These explicitly erotic texts sometimes created a link between breastfeeding and sexual desire, suggesting that there was an existing cultural impetus to view the maternal breast and the sexual breast as one and the same. For instance, Thomas Stretzer’s _A New Description of Merryland_ (1740) was part of a genre of geographic erotica that portrayed the female body topographically and dwelled fondly on its charms, including the lactating breasts: “There are two other pleasant little Mountains called BBY, which tho’ at some Distance from MERRYLAND, have great Affinity with that Country, and are properly reckoned as an Appendage to it. These little Mountains are exactly alike, and not far from each other, having a pleasant Valley between them; on the Top of each is a fine Fountain, that yields a very wholesome Liquor much esteemed, especially by the younger sort of People.”80 Stretzer’s text indicated that the breasts and their fine fountains of milk (much esteemed by infants) were as much a part of the erotic topography of the female body as any other part, showing that in the erotic imagination at least there was little distinction between the maternal breast and the sexual breast. However, this type of depiction of the maternal/sexual
The highest pleasure was different from those that would appear in maternal advice manuals in that here the breast was subject to the desiring male gaze (and, presumably, touch), whereas advice manual writers first of all centered their discussions of pleasure on the sensations of the maternal body itself.

Alongside erotic texts, some early medical writers also offered discussions that linked sexual pleasure and breastfeeding. The sixteenth-century French surgeon Ambroise Paré described the act of breastfeeding as explicitly sexual, for he explained that “as the breast is tickled, the womb is aroused and feels a pleasurable titillation, since that little tip of the breast is very sensitive because of the nerves that end there.” This titillation provided an incentive for “the female to offer and exhibit her breasts more willingly to the child, who tickles them sweetly with its tongue and mouth, from which the woman derives a great delectation.” Paré was obviously aware, at least to a certain extent, of the physiological link between suckling and sexual arousal. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, the British physician John Burton was more physiologically specific, describing how the sexual organs were connected by nerves to other parts of the body and using this fact to explain “why some [women] are so fond of giving Suck, and why Tickling the Nipples occasions an agreeable Sensation in the Clitoris.” These medical texts differed from prescriptive texts in that they framed their discussions in terms of anatomy rather than in the context of broader discussions of motherhood and maternal duty.

The large body of prescriptive literature for mothers that emerged starting in the eighteenth century provided a new realm for exploring the sensual aspects of motherhood in a context that was neither explicitly erotic nor solely medical. As the rhetoric of pleasure emerged in their discussions of breastfeeding, these prescriptive authors did not shy away from the sensual pleasures of the lactating mother and her nursing infant. The midwife Martha Mears, writing in the 1790s, waxed poetic on the physical pleasures of nursing and claimed that “the act itself is attended with a sweet thrilling, and delightful sensations, of which those only who have felt them can form any idea.” This description of the thrilling physical sensations of nursing was evidently so compelling that William Buchan included it in his own book in 1803. He also gushed that “the mental raptures of a fond mother at such moments are far beyond the powers of description or fancy.” Breastfeeding was indeed a stimulating subject, prompting Buchan to refer on two separate occasions to the “thrilling sensations” of breastfeeding. Buchan’s references to thrilling sensations and mental raptures clearly...
exhibited the influence of Enlightenment ideas about sensibility, invoking the belief that the physical stimulation of the nerves would also prompt a similarly intense emotional response.  Thus the physical pleasures of breastfeeding stimulated corresponding emotional pleasures, fueling the affections of the good mother. Sensual pleasure and maternal feeling were mutually reinforcing.

While Mears and Buchan focused primarily on the pleasures of the nursing mother, other authors described the ways in which breastfeeding became a sensual experience for both mother and infant. Writing in 1825, William Dewees first offered a strikingly erotic description of the physical pleasures of lactation for the mother. He insisted that “if we can believe the fond mother upon this point, there is no earthly pleasure equal to that of suckling her child—and if any reliance can be placed upon external signs, she is every way worthy of belief.” Dewees did not specify exactly what external signs might testify to the woman’s experience of pleasure, but in case the reader did not quite catch the fact that this pleasure was profoundly physical, he went on to explain that “this pleasure does not seem to be the mere exercise of social feeling while the mother is witnessing the delight of the little hungry urchin, as it seizes upon the breast . . . but from a positive pleasure derived from the act itself; for most truly it may be said, when ‘The starting beverage meets its thirsty lip, / ’Tis joy to yield it, as ’tis joy to sip.’” Thus women’s pleasure was not simply the result of maternal affection or the sense of a duty well done; it was a pleasure specifically occasioned by the physical act of suckling an infant. Moreover, in the midst of Dewees’s exuberant description of maternal pleasure, he noted the pleasure of the infant and the delight with which it “seizes upon the breast.” He referred furthermore to “the rapturous expression of its speaking eye” and “the writhing of its little body from excess of joy.” If Dewees was to be believed, breastfeeding was a physically pleasurable experience for both mother and infant that was tinged with sensuality and even eroticism. The raptures and writhing of the mother and her infant centered on the breast and signified a deeply sensual experience, superior to any other “earthly pleasure.”

Other writers focused more specifically on the sensual pleasures enjoyed by the nursing infant. The American physician Frederick Hollick offered a tactile description of “the graceful swell of the fully developed breast” and suggested that the beauty of the breast was not merely aesthetic, but “a matter of positive utility, as well as of beauty, because it better adapts it to the use of the child, and probably also adds to its pleasure, as anyone may
readily conceive who will observe the delight with which an infant, even when not nursing, will often caress it.”

Here, the infant’s delight in its mother’s breast was not simply a matter of nutrition, for it took pleasure in caressing the breast at other times as well. Hollick’s description echoed the vision set forth by the eighteenth-century English scientist and poet Erasmus Darwin in his popular and frequently excerpted set of poems in which he described the nursing infant as a plunderer of his mother’s charms:

So when the Mother, bending o’er his charms,
Clasps her fair nursling in delighted arms;
Throws the thin ’kerchief from her neck of snow,
And half unveils the pearly orbs below;
With sparkling eye the blameless plunderer owns
Her soft embraces, and endearing tones,
Seeks the salubrious fount with opening lips,
Spreads his inquiring hands, and smiles, and sips.

These verses dramatized the act of breastfeeding as a moment of unveiling in which the woman’s charms were exposed to view and to the plundering mouth and hands of the infant. Darwin’s and Hollick’s descriptions slipped subtly between references to the beauty of the female breast (which could be appreciated by the male gaze as well as the infant’s) and the pleasures of touch, here enjoyed by the infant but also imagined by the male authors. Darwin and Hollick both seemed to hint at what Sigmund Freud would much later make explicit in his work on child sexuality—that the experience of sexual satisfaction begins with taking nourishment from the breast. As Freud wrote, “No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life.”

Although pre-Freudian prescriptive writers did not explicitly explore this avenue of thought, their descriptions of the sensual pleasures of breastfeeding for both infant and mother paralleled notions of sexual pleasure and satisfaction experienced by adult men and women.

Some texts also drew more specific parallels between the sensual pleasure of the suckling infant and the sexual pleasure of the fond husband. A didactic article in a ladies’ magazine included an excerpt from the Philosophia de l’univers (1796) by the French economist and writer Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours that described the ideal woman’s physical attributes and explicitly attested to the fact that the maternal breast was always

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also a sexual breast. Exploring the intersection of motherhood and sexuality, the author proclaimed: “Let her enchanting bosom represent the celestial globes, of which a rose-bud shall form the magnetic pole. Let it offer to desire its first enjoyment—its first nourishment to infancy; and let man ever remain in doubt whether it has most contributed to the happiness of the father or the son.”93 Here, the infant’s pleasure and that of the husband (and perhaps the mother too) intertwined around the enchanting breast. The author emphasized that the breast both fueled desire and provided nourishment, thus satisfying the infant and the father. Which of the two functions was more important the author could not quite decide, but his coy conclusion suggested that male sexual desire may have been foremost in his thoughts. Whatever his primary interest in the female breast, he brought together motherhood and sexuality in one clear image.

Alongside these parallels between infant desire and adult male desire, advice manual authors emphasized the link between maternal breastfeeding and marital happiness. Hugh Smith, writing in 1767, was one of the earliest authors to evoke the significance of breastfeeding for the marital relationship. Rapturously describing how a husband must feel upon seeing “a dear little cherub at your breast,” he insisted that “how ardent soever such an one’s affections might be before matrimony, a scene like this will more firmly rivet the pleasing fetters of love.”94 Moreover, he asserted that “though a beautiful virgin must ever kindle emotions in a man of sensibility, a chaste, and tender wife, with a little one at her breast, is certainly to her husband the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth.”95 For Smith, breastfeeding enhanced female beauty and desirability and strengthened the bonds between husband and wife. These descriptions ran counter to an older belief that breastfeeding interfered with the enjoyment of female beauty and marital pleasures. Samuel Richardson, for instance, merged new ideas with old when his fictional heroine Pamela argued with her husband for the right to breastfeed her own child. Representing the new idealization of motherhood, Pamela insisted that it was her duty to nurse her infant, while her husband clung to older ideas when he told her in no uncertain terms that he believed breastfeeding would interfere with his enjoyment of her physical charms.96 Thus Smith’s depiction of the desirable mother represented a new vision of femininity in which motherhood defined the peak of women’s moral, emotional, and physical appeal. Rather than allowing motherhood and marital relations to remain in tension, Smith skillfully melded the two around the enchanting maternal breast.
Smith was not alone in his assessment of the desirability of the good mother. As the nineteenth-century American phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler demanded, “Who but a flint-hearted gelding, emasculated of every manly virtue and feeling, can ever cease to love her who has borne him even but one child, and love her more and more by every new object of parental love? Certainly, who not riddled of every masculine feeling, but will be doubly enamored of her maternal charms, and chant anthems of perpetual love to her, while carrying within her the sacred casket of all his joys and treasures?” Drawing a connection between true masculinity and passion for maternal charms, Fowler made it clear that maternity only enhanced feminine appeal and masculine affections. In this view, motherhood did not thwart male desire, but increased it. Mrs. Dawbarn shifted this vision slightly by depicting the pleasure that the good mother experienced in witnessing the enjoyment of her husband. She proclaimed that “there is no enjoyment in nature which affords such exquisite pleasure as is felt by a tender mother, when she is nourishing her infant at her breast, and beholds her husband smiling in approbation.” Although in this scene the husband ostensibly communicated approval of his wife’s virtue as a mother, the gaze of the husband and the “exquisite pleasure” of the mother signaled other dimensions of their relationship. Overall, prescriptive writers agreed that women only became more appealing when they became mothers, and that the passion created by parenthood (properly experienced within marriage, of course) represented the pinnacle of heterosexual love. As Fowler put it, it is “after they have become parents together—that they can be completely enamored of each other; because it is her maternal relations which most of all endear the wife to her husband, besides making her love him inexpressibly more for being the father of her idolized children.” Motherhood and romantic love were therefore fundamentally compatible, even mutually dependent.

By mingling references to the pleasures of mother, infant, and father, advocates of maternal breastfeeding accentuated the parallel pleasures invoked by the touch and the gaze. Whereas descriptions of the mother and infant emphasized the importance of reciprocal touching, in other depictions the gaze of the husband took center stage and intimated that the sight of breastfeeding might provide as much pleasure as the physical experience itself. The husband took pleasure in watching his wife, while the wife took pleasure in physical contact with her infant and in her husband’s gaze. Karen Harvey has explored the notion that visual connoisseurship was a
specifically “masculine endeavor,” especially when concerned with the female form. The sight of a woman breastfeeding was presented as a particularly appealing scene for the male gaze, and it contained erotic possibilities. The mother’s flesh was evocative of both motherhood and sexuality, and the gaze of her husband encompassed and enjoyed both aspects of her corporeality. Thus in the descriptions of advice manual authors, breastfeeding became a three-way site of familial pleasure. The maternal breast became the focal point of the scene in which mother and infant enjoyed the tenderness of mutual caresses while the husband bore rapturous witness to their pleasures. The erotic possibilities revealed in these sources suggested that maternity and sexuality were meant to go hand in hand in the context of marriage.

Yet prescriptive authors’ descriptions of breastfeeding also attested to a certain ambivalence toward erotic pleasure. While describing the pleasures of breastfeeding in rather exuberant terms, they also portrayed the mother as chaste and tender, a figure clearly untainted by base passions. Images of the mother as modest and restrained yet simultaneously swept by pleasurable sensations implied a drive to embrace pleasure while remaining within the safe bounds of appropriate feminine virtue and modesty. However, prescriptive authors seemed to be more explicitly concerned with the restraint of male sexuality. In their descriptions of the beauty, desirability, and virtue of nursing mothers, writers also claimed that breastfeeding created important familial ties that restrained men’s potentially dangerous passions. Hugh Smith urged women to breastfeed their children as a way of preserving mutual ties of affection between themselves and their husbands, for, “by these powerful ties, many a man, in spite of impetuous passions, is compelled to continue the prudent, kind, indulgent, tender husband.”

William Buchan asserted that by breastfeeding the good mother would ensure “the steady attachment of her husband.” By insisting on the respect and affection due a virtuous mother, these authors envisioned a way of controlling men’s carnal urges, keeping men’s sexual activities and affections within the bounds of marriage.

Acknowledging the potentially erotic dimensions of maternal advice literature raises conceptual challenges for historians. At first glance there seems to be a fundamental incompatibility between the maternal ideology that celebrated women as uniquely moral, chaste, and virtuous, on the one hand, and depictions of breastfeeding as a sensual pleasure, on the other. One possible resolution of this conflict could be to read the sensual descriptions of breastfeeding as a way of concealing female sexual pleasure within
the more chaste physical enjoyment of maternity, as well as viewing it as a means of controlling men's sexual appetites by emphasizing the devotion due the pure mother. Yet to assume that advice manual authors sought only to disguise and restrain sexuality too readily falls in line with long-standing assumptions about sexual repression in this time period. Instead, we might view the pleasures of breastfeeding as part of the ascendancy of romantic love in American culture, by which sex became an acceptable and even sacred component of a loving relationship. Karen Lystra writes that “properly sanctioned by love, sexual expressions were read as symbolic communications of one’s real and truest self, part of the hidden essence of the individual.” Moreover, she argues that Americans saw children as precious symbols of romantic love. Representations of breastfeeding and its connection to loving marital relations hinted at this evolving attitude toward sexuality and romantic love in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus we might see the eroticized triad of mother-infant-father as a means of retaining sexual desire and expression within the bounds of the home, offering a safe realm of sexual expression for virtuous women while drawing men away from the world of vice and into the bosom of the family. Descriptions of the nursing mother's sensual enjoyment opened an avenue for acknowledging women's physical pleasure while still remaining within the proper bounds of sentimental and domestic imagery. Motherhood and sexuality were not necessarily incompatible, for sexual enjoyment could be sanctified by romantic love and by parenthood. The erotic tones in advice manuals implied willingness, eagerness even, to explore women's capacity for sensual enjoyment in the context of sentimental motherhood.

These erotically charged descriptions add important nuance to our understanding of the trope of the sentimental mother. While historians might be inclined to ask whether the script of sentimental motherhood could be ideologically reconciled with visions of a robust female sexuality, perhaps a better question might be, did maternity and sexuality need to be reconciled? The language of pleasure employed by advocates of maternal breastfeeding performed important work in the cultural production of the sentimental maternal ideal by emphasizing the role of breastfeeding in cementing familial bonds and demonstrating maternal virtue. But descriptions of breastfeeding also valorized sensual pleasure and eroticized the figure of the mother without tarnishing her claims to virtue. It seemed that maternity and sexuality could coexist easily and naturally. Seamlessly invoking the joys and duties of motherhood and wifehood, William Buchan perhaps best summarized the multiple rewards of good mothering. In
Buchan’s view, the nursing mother “ensures the fulfillment of the promises made by the best writers on this subject—speedy recovery from child-bed, the firm establishment of good health, the exquisite sense of wedded joys, the capacity of bearing more children, the steady attachment of her husband, the esteem and respect of the public, the warm returns of affection and gratitude from the objects of her tender care, and after all, the satisfaction to see her daughters follow her example and recommend it to others.” Buchan’s ideal maternal script connected the “exquisite sense of wedded joys” to other facets of motherhood and marriage such as good health and filial affection. Thus he tied together the (exquisite) sexual enjoyment of the husband and wife and the satisfaction of the good mother. The concept of maternal sexuality was thus not the contradiction it might seem, but an important part of the sentimental maternal ideal. In the context of breastfeeding, advice manual authors created a vision of desire and pleasure that could flourish within the safe confines of motherhood and matrimonial affection, and these relations were in turn strengthened by the pleasures of breastfeeding.

In many ways, these advice manual authors were exceptional in acknowledging the potential for physical, even erotic, pleasure while breastfeeding. Their positive outlook on the convergence of motherhood and sexuality was eventually overcome by a suspicion of maternal sexuality, and it was not until the late twentieth century that a few American women, particularly feminist writers, began to embrace and explore in an explicit way the many pleasures implicated in the act of breastfeeding. The American feminist poet Alicia Ostriker was one of the first women in the twentieth century to openly discuss sexual arousal during breastfeeding. Ostriker described breastfeeding in the following verses:

Greedy baby
sucking the sweet tit
your tongue tugging the nipple tickles your mama
your round eyes open appear to possess understanding
when you suckle I am slowly moved
in my sensitive groove
you in your mouth are alive, I in my womb.

The feminist writer Adrienne Rich explored similar connections between breastfeeding and sexuality. “The act of suckling a child,” she wrote, “like
a sexual act, may be tense, physically painful, charged with cultural feelings of inadequacy and guilt; or, like a sexual act, it can be a physically delicious, elementally soothing experience, filled with a tender sensuality.”

But in the United States today any hint of sexual pleasure in the context of a maternal act conjures up the specter of sexual abuse in the public imagination, and the consequences for women who have admitted to feeling physical pleasure have been dire. Marilyn Yalom describes a case in which a child was taken away from its mother because she admitted to feelings of arousal during breastfeeding. It seems likely that an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century audience would have been perplexed and outraged by the actions of the court. In the framework that prescriptive authors created, it was important for women to experience breastfeeding as pleasurable, as this experience was understood to strengthen maternal and marital bonds. Moreover, women’s experience of physical and emotional pleasure was a testament to their sensibility, an essential trait of the sentimental mother. But now at the beginning of the twenty-first century most Americans recoil at the thought that breastfeeding can afford the mother any pleasure other than the satisfaction of a duty well done. In contrast, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prescriptive authors created a rhetorical framework in which women could experience physical pleasure as an integral part of motherhood.

Embracing women’s physical pleasure, however, was not meant as a form of female sexual liberation. This was not a nineteenth-century sexual revolution. Instead, notions of pleasure were an essential part of the emerging vision of the sentimental mother. This vision assumed that mothering was natural and instinctual and that all good mothers would want to breastfeed because it was best for their infants and themselves. Moreover, the pleasures of breastfeeding helped create a vision of motherhood as pure and delightful, unencumbered by the messy problems of the body. Breastfeeding was effortless and defined by emotional and physical pleasure, meaning that motherhood was not work, but pure delight. Furthermore, by locating physical pleasure within that most symbolic act of mothering, prescriptive authors bound women to a single identity. The biology of women’s bodies made it possible for women to bear children and nurse them, and popular representations of motherhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries likewise came to equate woman and mother. Women were meant to find their greatest pleasure in their capacity as mothers. As the popular author Lydia Sigourney explained, “The love of children, in man is a virtue: in woman, an element of nature. It is a feature of her constitution, a proof of His wisdom, who, having entrusted to her the burden of the early nurture
of a whole race, gave that sustaining power which produces harmony, between her dispositions, and her allotted tasks.” Prescriptive authors described the experience of mothering as one of unmitigated joy and importance for the individual, the family, and society. Women were meant to derive pleasure—even erotic pleasure—from the maternal role, but this pleasure was circumscribed within very clear limits. Women, or at least good women, fulfilled naturally and instinctively the role of the sentimental mother, who exemplified “true domestic bliss, / The fountain of maternal love, / Welling with happiness.” To step beyond this role was to leave the safety of the sentimental maternal ideal and to expose oneself to the scorn and derision of society—to become unnatural and monstrous.