The script of sentimental motherhood emerged tentatively in the late eighteenth century in a range of cultural forms, including medical, moral, and prescriptive literature, but it reached its fullest expression in the realm of popular print, which was rapidly expanding in volume and variety by the early decades of the nineteenth century. This ephemeral print culture was different from the previous world of print, in which volumes of essays, religious matter, and even occasionally novels had been understood as the most legitimate material for respectable readers. Instead, this growing realm of popular print matter was characterized by the rapid production of daily, weekly, monthly, and annually published material, providing American readers with a constantly varying literary and visual feast. For the first time in American history much of this print culture—particularly texts such as magazines and giftbooks—was marketed for women, constituting a new feminine sphere in American culture. Combining didactic fiction, essays, poetry, and, increasingly, beautiful and expensive images, this emerging ephemeral feminine print culture promulgated a rich vision of feminine “beauty, piety, and morality.” At the heart of this vision reposed the figure of the sentimental mother.

Both texts and images were notable for their use of sentimentalism, a mode that emphasized sympathy and sensibility in the construction of the self and in the act of storytelling. Sentimental print culture played a much larger role in American society than simply enriching the affective lives of readers; it was also instrumental in creating and defining the emerging American middle class. As the United States evolved in the first half of the nineteenth century into a more ethnically diverse, individualistic, geographically mobile, urban, and market-driven society, the middle class increasingly relied on sentimental culture to create and regulate its identity. Middle-class Americans (particularly those newly arrived to genteel prosperity) lived with anxiety about the volatility of their economic fortunes,
and this sense of vulnerability meant that they clung even more tenaciously to cultural (rather than monetary) markers of class identity. Sentimental culture and the printed objects that disseminated its values provided a means of creating and communicating cultural belonging based on a constellation of virtues that by the 1850s came to be known simply as “gentility.” Gentility signified inner qualities of integrity, restraint, taste, and virtue that could be best cultivated by interacting with appropriate cultural forms.

By reading emotionally and morally uplifting poetry aloud with friends and family, by arranging elegantly bound giftbooks on parlor tables, or by framing magazine embellishments on the parlor wall, women in particular could send a clear message about their virtue, sensibility, and taste. The language of sentiment was understood to generate a particular way of feeling and being in society that communicated a sense of mutual belonging and a conviction of moral and cultural authority among those who participated in its values and emotions. Sentimental culture fostered a sense of morality and gentility that was understood to exist in tension with the perceived vices of the poor and the excesses of the rich. By placing the good mother at the heart of sentimental print culture, these texts marked the sentimental mother as a white middle-class icon.

The values of middle-class sentimental culture overlapped in important ways with the religious revivalism that emerged in the late eighteenth century and reached new heights in the first half of the nineteenth century. Having gained considerable momentum in the 1820s and 1830s, driven particularly by members of the middle class, the Second Great Awakening swept the nation and gave new purpose to those seeking a higher spiritual realm. This surge in religious enthusiasm was paired with the notion that human labors could perfect society and bring about the millennium, which would be followed by the second coming of Christ. As part of this millennial optimism, this period saw a growing body of religious writings that praised the influence of women in achieving a more Christian society. In particular, evangelical religion promoted a vision of the mother as the moral and emotional center of the family whose duty and joy was in assuring the spiritual salvation of her husband and children. Large numbers of pious middle-class women acted on this vision by forming maternal associations and writing and consuming advice about how to rear Christian children.

The feminine sphere of popular print culture merged explicitly religious goals and more secular sentimental imagery in the figure of the mother. In the realm of print culture, artists and writers could fully embrace the idealization of sentimental motherhood and create—unfettered by the complex
lived experiences of maternity—a vision of the mother as the epitome of white middle-class beauty, morality, and piety. Images and poems, often working in tandem, were particularly central to the formation of this image of the sentimental mother. Indeed, by the 1830s images and poems worked together to create a remarkably consistent image of the sentimental mother that was marked by a particular vision of the maternal body. While women’s personal depictions of motherhood consistently dwelled upon the messy and challenging physicality of motherhood, in sentimental print culture the figure of the mother became divorced from the more embodied aspects of maternity. The maternal body was refined, passive, and unobtrusive in its textual form. Instead of depicting the work that women performed as mothers, these images and verses highlighted the more nebulous concepts of maternal virtue and maternal influence. Whereas earlier depictions of the mother in print culture often explored the bustling activities required by childrearing, by the 1830s mothering seemed to become less a form of labor and more a way of being. The good mother simply was, and her very existence allowed her to transform the lives of her children.

This move toward the noncorporeal mother was part of a broader cultural trend toward emphasizing the power of the sentimental mother. In order for mothers to be powerful, they had to be released from the constraints of their material lives so that their moral influence could be boundless, allowing them to shape the moral course of their children (and, consequently, their nation). As sentimental images and poems sought to deemphasize the physicality of the mother and to celebrate her emotional and spiritual attributes, the good mother was elevated to “a higher place in the scale of being,” a position of nearly deity-like power by which she surpassed the limits of ordinary human existence and influence. This vision particularly emerged in poetry, which developed an extreme version of sentimental motherhood that I call the transcendent mother. Whereas maternal advice literature celebrated a refined vision of maternal embodiment that was centered on the act of breastfeeding and its sentimental importance, the transcendent mother was refined to such an extent that her body simply disappeared. She became defined not by her materiality, but by her spirituality. As one poet effused about the ideal maternal figure: “Often, in my dreams, she stands, an angel to my sight,/Glowing in all the nameless charms of Heaven’s eternal light.” She was also transcendent in the sense that her most important traits—her love and Christian influence—were not limited by time, space, or mortality. While childbearing women were rooted
in their daily lives by the repeated physical challenges of childbearing and childrearing, the transcendent mother was freed from the constraints of her body so that her pious influence on her family could extend across time and space and from beyond the grave.

By the 1830s visual depictions of motherhood were abundant in popular feminine print culture, but this had not been the case in earlier decades. The sphere of feminine print culture itself was only just emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and so the choice of publications treating subjects such as motherhood was limited. Moreover, the technology for the mass reproduction of high-quality images was also just developing at this time. Thus American women's magazines, which tentatively emerged in the 1790s with *The Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge*, initially presented few visual “embellishments,” making it difficult for historians to assess the ways in which the mother may have evolved in the popular visual imagination prior to the 1830s.17

Children's books, however, which enjoyed a growth in popularity in the last decades of the eighteenth century and often included illustrations, provided one source of images of motherhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Early children's books hardly offered the same visual abundance that would characterize later magazines and giftbooks—their illustrations tended to be small and rough—but they did portray interactions between mothers and children. Children's books often depicted mothers actively engaging with their children in different activities and frequently highlighted the importance of the mother's role in educating her children. By the late eighteenth century, most Americans agreed that one of women's most important roles was as an educator for her children, and it was a role that middle-class and elite mothers themselves took seriously.18 For instance, the letters of Rachel Lazarus, who raised siblings, stepchildren, and her own children in North Carolina in the early nineteenth century, reveal a woman deeply committed to finding the best teaching materials and the best pedagogical practices.19 She worked hard to become a capable teacher, and other sources suggest that she was not alone in this endeavor. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that early images of mothers and children often highlighted not only the mother-child bond, but also the teacher-student relationship. One rather rough image from the title page of *A Present for a Little Girl* (1804), for instance, depicted a mother and her two children studying nature under the shade of a tree. The mother held the
younger of the two children, who gestured to the other with an open book, while the older child appeared to be studying a family of birds and reporting back to mother and sibling.20

Education was just one of the many mothering activities portrayed in illustrations for children’s books. Another book from 1816, this one in verse, included illustrations highlighting the stages of a child’s development. One such image depicted the mother sitting under a tree in a cottage garden and stretching out her arms to assist her toddler as he learned to “go alone.”21

Ann Taylor, a popular British children’s author, published a number of works that were printed in Great Britain and America. Her poem “My Mother” appeared in varying forms through the early decades of the nineteenth century and included small illustrations of the mother engaged in various activities, from breastfeeding, to assisting her toddler after a fall, to teaching her daughter how to play.22 Another book of children’s verse included images of the mother instructing her children, as well as a poem in which a child enumerated the work of her mother in guarding, washing, soothing, healing, and teaching her children.23

What these early children’s illustrations had in common was an emphasis on the different kinds of activities involved in mothering, from caring for an ailing child, to helping a toddler learn to walk, to facilitating a child’s moral and intellectual education. Many of these children’s books depicted different stages in children’s physical and mental development, and in doing so they also represented the evolving activities involved in mothering children as they grew. The mother in children’s books tended to be an active figure; she used her body to support her children, and she employed her mind to advance their education. These texts and images showed mothers and children as busy creatures, facing new tasks and surmounting new challenges together. In short, these images of the mother suggested that motherhood was work—charming and delightful work, perhaps, but work nonetheless. These types of images continued to appear in children’s books beyond the early years of the nineteenth century.24

Putting children’s book illustrations side by side with images from the feminine print sphere of magazines and giftbooks that grew increasingly popular by the 1830s risks conflating images intended for different audiences. Illustrations created for children did not necessarily seek to convey the same vision of motherhood as those intended for older viewers. Moreover, by portraying the activities of children, they also necessarily portrayed the activities of the mothers who assisted these childish pursuits. But putting these images side by side does at least allow us to see the different pos-
sibilities available for the visual depiction of motherhood. Comparing portrayals of the active mothers in children's literature with the images of mothers intended for older readers helps us recognize the choices that were made and the different meanings that were generated when visual depictions of motherhood became common in popular magazines and giftbooks.

By the 1830s print technology had advanced to a degree that made the mass dissemination of images more feasible, and this visual abundance became one of the factors that propelled the growing enthusiasm for relatively expensive texts such as annual giftbooks (ranging in price from three to fifteen dollars) and increasingly elegant illustrated periodicals (around two to three dollars for a subscription). 25 *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, for instance, was one of the earliest American women’s magazines and became enormously popular for its beautiful hand-colored fashion plates, which were joined over time by engravings of paintings paired with stories and poems. 26 By the 1840s *Godey’s* was joined by other illustrated magazines such as *Graham’s Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* and *Miss Leslie’s Magazine*. 27 Although these magazines were produced in the large urban centers of the Eastern Seaboard, such as Philadelphia and New York, they targeted a national audience and provided a means of connecting Americans across the nation via a shared literary and artistic experience. 28 Giftbooks, those elegantly bound volumes of prose and verse that were often exchanged at Christmas and the New Year, were also increasingly filled with images, often engravings of paintings by well-known European and American artists that depicted historic events, elegant portraits, and domestic scenes. 29 These pictures were the main attraction for many readers, though the poems and stories that accompanied them were also popular. 30 But the beautiful graphics in magazines and giftbooks were not simply for viewing pleasure. Their beauty was understood to facilitate moral and spiritual uplift, and they were viewed as sources of instruction and inspiration, providing an enticing means of conveying to women in particular how best to cultivate virtue and gentility. 31 Mothers and children were common subjects in these volumes, sending a clear message that female virtue was most profoundly anchored in motherhood.

By the 1830s, as sentimentalism became the dominant mode in popular print culture in both its literary and visual forms, the mother emerged as a figure meant to convey virtue and emotion. The paintings reproduced in nineteenth-century magazines and giftbooks were drawn from a range of artists, time periods, and genres, but they nevertheless collectively presented a coherent vision of the sentimental mother. First and foremost, the
sentimental mother was uniformly young, white, and socioeconomically privileged—the occasional images of mothers who did not embody these three traits generally signaled to the viewer that this was not a sentimental mother to be revered by the viewer, but a deficient mother presented to elicit pity or horror. Although the sentimental mother could not be pictured as a disembodied figure in images, which clearly necessitated some kind of visual corporeal presence, her body could be refined, concealed, or deemphasized in favor of exploring her emotional and spiritual influence. The ideal mother in sentimental imagery was not composed of fertile round belly, full breasts, and busy hands; instead, she was physically restrained and passive, but emotionally and spiritually potent. The illustrations of the mother that appeared in increasing abundance in magazines and giftbooks tended to represent four main types, which I label the mourning mother, the fond mother, the Madonna, and the rustic mother. The first three types shared important characteristics in that they depicted the mother as young, white, beautiful, and surrounded by the trappings of a genteel home. She was usually depicted holding or watching over a single infant, or at most one infant and one small child, suggesting that her maternal cares were intensively focused on just one or two small “treasures.” These images of motherhood were curiously static—the mother (and her preternaturally well-behaved children) seemed to do very little. She was not busy with the many activities of mothering such as bathing, dressing, feeding, healing, teaching, and playing, which we know occupied women’s time. Instead, often with the assistance of an accompanying poem or story, the portrait of the mother conveyed a deep emotional realm of maternal devotion and piety.

Images of the mourning mother were among the most common to grace the pages of women’s magazines and giftbooks, echoing the reality that infant mortality rates were high and that many mothers faced the loss of at least one child. Portraits of genteel mothers grieving over their dead or dying infants and the verses that often accompanied them must have resonated with readers. In these mourning images the physicality of the mother and of her relationship with her child were downplayed. Instead, viewers were compelled to imagine the sentiments of the mother as she drooped pensively over the dying child or the empty cradle. Although we know that women were often the primary medical caretakers for ailing family members, these images rarely depicted the mother laboring to heal her child; instead they focused principally on her grief and resignation. One such image was accompanied by a short text combining poetry and prose that
idealized the faith and submission of grieving mothers. In this image the mother’s bent posture, bowed head, and lowered gaze spoke to her sorrow and submissiveness alike. She was weighed down by grief, physically as well as emotionally, but it was a grief that Christian piety demanded she accept with resignation. The listlessness of her body, her left arm hanging softly down at her side, her bonnet lying forgotten on the floor, and her workbag hanging untouched from her chair, emphasized the passivity of one who is lost in spiritual realms, one who “lives in the past, so sweet with human love and hope—in the future, so glorious with heavenly love and joy.”\textsuperscript{33} She did not live in the now of the empty cradle beside her, but in a larger and more enduring realm of sentiment and pious submission (see fig. 5.1). A similar image featured the grieving mother in an almost identical posture as she drooped over the bed of her “dying babe.”\textsuperscript{34} In this case, the mother reached out one hand to hold that of the child, providing a small physical connection symbolic of the mother-child bond. Living, yet lost in reverie, the grieving mother’s body was useful only to the extent that it could convey her sense of loss and her quiet resignation.

Even more common than images of the mourning mother were portraits of the “fond mother” and her offspring. These images often portrayed scenes of greater beauty, even opulence, compared to images of the mourning mother, presenting the mother-child dyad as if it were a jewel in a beautiful setting. They also tended to highlight the beauty of mother and child. Mothers with luxurious curls and children with cherubic faces populated the pages of elegant magazines and giftbooks, seeming to suggest that motherhood lifted women to new heights of inner and outer beauty that could best be evoked by glowing eyes, smooth cheeks, glossy hair, and tender smiles. Most often in these images the mother held an infant or toddler, thus romanticizing the affective bonds formed by the young mother and her new offspring. Less often, these images also included an older child as part of a trio. These images suggested that mothering was envisioned as intensive rather than extensive. The good mother poured her love and devotion on just one or two treasured children. One such engraving, based on a painting by the American artist Robert Walter Weir, presented a richly attired young mother with an infant in her lap and her young daughter at her side (see fig. 5.2).\textsuperscript{35} The artist celebrated the cherished relationships within this elegant trio and visualized the connection between them: the infant resting on its mother’s lap, the older child’s hand lying softly on the baby, and the mother and older daughter exchanging a steady and affectionate gaze that provided the emotional weight of the image.
FIGURE 5.1 The Empty Cradle, in Godey’s Lady’s Book (1847). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.
Images of the fond mother almost invariably emphasized the mother’s countenance rather than her body. In most images, the mother’s form was subsumed by the folds and puffs of her gown, or her body was largely excluded from the framing of the image. These images were not meant to suggest the abundance and fecundity of the maternal body, but to emphasize instead her inner qualities and emotional connections. Against the backdrop of rich fabric or, occasionally, a natural scene, the mother’s face and the faces of her children shone forth with increased emphasis. If, as many writers suggested in the nineteenth century, a beautiful countenance reflected inner virtue, there could surely be no question of the inner substance of these mothers and their offspring. One image of a “Mother and Infant” evoked a particularly disembodied vision of maternity. In this image the only distinct elements were the mother’s face and the infant’s head, both brightened against the dark fuzziness of the forest that engrossed most of the scene. The mother was almost as swaddled in indistinct garments as her infant, and the only aspect of her physical presence that stood out clearly was her face, which gazed down with a slight sweet smile at the infant in her arms as it reached one plump hand toward her cheek. The accompanying

Figure 5.2 Maternal Affection, in The American Juvenile Keepsake (1834). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
poem spoke of “true domestic bliss” and fountains of maternal love, and indeed the emotional bond between the two was evidently the focal point of the image. Such depictions of mothers were intended to draw in the interest of the viewer not because of any compelling action or personality, but because of the emotional weight of the scene and what it signified for the enactment of ideal womanhood.

Images of motherhood in popular print culture also at times drew on religious iconography by echoing images of the Madonna. Some were direct reproductions of paintings of the Virgin Mary, such as an engraving based on the painting entitled *Madonna and Child* (1638) by the Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. In this case, the image was retitled *The Christian Mother*, thus eliding associations with Catholicism in the interest of appealing to a majority Protestant readership in America. The accompanying poem helped the reader understand the image, in which

The mother watches o’er her only child  
With that long, earnest, and impassioned gaze  
Which so much hope, which so much fear betrays.  

Other references to the Madonna were less direct, as in an image titled *The Young Mother* that appeared in a giftbook in 1845. This young mother presented the easily recognizable pose of the Madonna, face turned partly to the side and tilted slightly toward the infant, eyes gazing downward, head modestly covered with a light veil, and a blank background that evaded contextual specificity, suggesting the timelessness of maternal virtue. Isabelle Lehuu has argued that popular images of mothers and children reflected a “softening of American Protestantism” and a new emphasis on more feminine sensibility usually associated with Catholicism. Images that mirrored the figure of the Madonna reaffirmed the links among sentimental culture, feminine virtue, and Christian piety.

Like the women pictured earlier, sentimental visual culture commonly represented mothers as refined and detached from the world around them, intimating that they lived in a rich interior emotional realm. At a time when American society was rapidly changing and Americans were increasingly gravitating to bustling, diverse, and impersonal urban areas, it is easy to imagine how these images of domestic tranquility might have provided a reassuring reminder of the enduring benefits of maternal influence. Sitting quietly amid the activity of others, gazing gently into space, or looking fondly at her child, rather than engaging directly either with the viewer or with her own world, the sentimental mother was young and beautiful, but
her most compelling quality was her aloof passivity and her air of grave contemplation, which gave the impression that she lived in but was not entirely of the everyday world.

There were occasional exceptions to this visual trend of the restrained and passive mother. One image that appeared in *Godey’s* in 1845 depicted a mother in the act of instructing her young daughter to read, a more elegant version of a scene that would have been familiar to readers of children's books (see fig. 5.3). Another picture in a giftbook featured a mother showing her tiny daughter how to kneel down to pray. A more unusual image featured a mother apparently in the midst of a little dance with both arms raised above her head as if to snap her fingers and one foot outstretched as if to tap the floor, her baby looking on from a plush chair. This particular engraving presented the mother as unusually active, as very few other images depicted the mother standing, much less actually in motion. Alongside these unusually active mothers, there were also occasional images that broke with the trend of portraying the mother as uniformly young and beautiful. One such image depicted a daughter and her aged mother begging for money. The mother’s face was delicately wrinkled, and her hands were misshapen, as if poverty had aged her prematurely. The mother’s age and her poverty set her apart from the usual depictions of ideal motherhood. Such exceptions were rare, however, and the visual shock of finding an active or aged mother presented in the pages of a magazine or giftbook attests to the overwhelming similarities in images of motherhood in this period.

The only common exceptions to the young, beautiful, and passive mother were those images that fell into the fourth category, that of the rustic mother (so named because she appeared in front of a quaint country cottage or in an agricultural scene). The rustic mother was more active than the other maternal types, or at the very least she was surrounded by activity. She was most often portrayed with three to six children around her, suggestive of a bustling household and many demands upon the mother’s time and energy. In one such image, the mother was presented in a wooded scene with four children. The children collected vines into a large basket while the mother was in the process of placing a garland on one daughter’s head. Another image, printed in different iterations throughout the mid-nineteenth century, was based on a painting by the eighteenth-century British artist Thomas Gainsborough. *The Cottage Door* featured a mother standing outside the door of her cozy cottage with an infant in her arms and five other children playing at her feet. Although the mother appeared calm and detached as she gazed into the distance, the lively figures of the children...
evoked the babble and bustle of a large family. Another rustic cottage scene, based on a painting by the early nineteenth-century British painter Louisa Sharpe, displayed a husband’s “unlooked for return” from war (see fig. 5.4).47
His wife, seated with a baby in her lap and two older children nearby, lifted her hand to her face in astonishment and emotion, and even the infant seemed so surprised that it turned away from nursing, leaving her left breast exposed. This image eschewed the restraint and passivity of the other maternal types. Catching the mother in the act of breastfeeding in the midst of a crowded household, this image suggested that she was a good mother devoted to the many essential tasks of childrearing. In fact, visual depictions of breastfeeding mothers were quite rare in popular magazines and giftbooks, and when the act of breastfeeding was featured it was almost invariably in a rustic setting.

These engravings of rustic mothers were nearly always based on paintings dating from an earlier period. The fact that they were reproduced in the nineteenth century suggested a certain degree of popular nostalgia for the figure of the busy rural eighteenth-century housewife with a baby at the breast and a cluster of children around her. She was robust, lively, and affectionate, and these popular images seemed to mirror the common

FIGURE 5.4 *The Unlooked for Return*, in *The Keepsake* (1833). Author’s collection.
view in medical and prescriptive literature that rural women enjoyed better reproductive health than their urban counterparts and therefore were particularly robust and suitable as mothers. In spite of this nostalgic and romantic view of the countryside, however, the rustic mother appeared far less often in visual culture than did the more passive figures of the mourning mother, the fond mother, and the Madonna, suggesting that the internal virtues of the sentimental mother held greater ideological weight for antebellum viewers than did the bustling activities of the attentive rustic mother.

The vision of the sentimental mother that developed in visual culture was pushed to greater extremes in the poems that peppered women’s magazines and giftbooks. Often these poems were paired with images, adding to the emotional experience of viewing an image and helping readers interpret it. Enjoying a wide readership, such poems were read aloud to friends and family, transmitted in letters, and adapted and preserved in diaries and albums by avid readers. These poems were so popular that they even inspired numerous amateur poets to try their hand at verse. In spite of its sheer abundance and its importance in the daily lives of nineteenth-century Americans, sentimental poetry has garnered relatively little scholarly attention, especially when compared with the number of works devoted to the canon of nineteenth-century literary greats. As Paula Bennett has noted, magazine poets in particular have typically been dismissed as “an eminently forgettable horde whose contributions to the enrichment of American literature were negligible at best.” Yet there can be no doubt that sentimental poetry claimed an important place in American culture and society. Sentimental poetry evoked situations and emotions that belonged to everyday life and offered readers both elevated ideals and messages of comfort. They helped readers cultivate the inner virtues of piety, restraint, and sensibility that were so prized in genteel culture. Moreover, popular literary forms opened new avenues for women to participate in the production and consumption of literature, particularly in the context of popular magazines. Sarah Josepha Hale, for instance, sought to reshape women’s writing by promoting emotionally difficult and socially significant themes in *Godey’s*. Rather than publish tales of romantic love, much of the poetry and fiction she chose focused on themes such as motherhood, death, family strife, and religion. Readers—often men as well as women—turned to sentimental poetry to have their emotions stirred by tender scenes and
melancholy reflections, and they saw in these poems a source of moral inspiration and regeneration.

These poems moved the mother one final step toward transcendence by portraying her as an entirely disembodied figure whose innate virtue transformed her into more of a spiritual force than a human agent. It was the combination of piety and maternal love that made the good mother so potent. As one moralist put it: “The influence of a pious mother is untold and boundless. It spreads from generation to generation—it stretches into eternity.” This pious influence was elaborated more fully in poetry, which explored through sentimental imagery the ways in which mothers shaped the emotional and moral worlds of their children. Emphasizing the potency of intangible concepts such as love and influence, by the 1830s sentimental poems about motherhood were remarkable for the consistent and nearly perfect disembodiment of the mother. Unlike images, which demanded some kind of corporeal presence, verse offered the ultimate means of freeing the good mother from the constraints of the body. Sentimental poems portrayed the mother as a spirit, a smile, a memory, a voice, an essence of everlasting and infinite love and piety; only occasionally did she arrive at a moment of corporeality when her hands, lips, or breast connected to the body of her beloved child in a perfect gesture of maternal affection. The mother’s power and influence depended on the timelessness and inexhaustibility of her virtues. Thus the ideal mother as she was imagined in popular poetry became more of a spirit than a living and laboring woman.

The literary figure of the mother was not always so ethereal and noncorporeal as she would become by the 1830s. Indeed, until the early nineteenth century, British and American authors tended to embrace and play with maternal corporeality. Although the mother was not as central to genteel literary culture in the eighteenth century as she would become, early English novels as well as magazine articles, stories, and poems did explore motherhood alongside more popular subjects such as nature, romantic love, marriage, and history. Next to love and female virtue, for instance, motherhood was a central theme in Samuel Richardson’s enormously popular epistolary novel Pamela (1740–41), which was enjoyed by British and American readers well into the nineteenth century. Pamela, a young servant whose surpassing beauty, purity, and piety made her an ideal heroine, began as an object of lust for her master, the illustrious Mr. B., but ended by overcoming his rakish tendencies with her virtuous example. The first part of Pamela’s adventure was rife with heaving bosoms and thwarted sexual
escapades, but by the third volume she was safely married to her erstwhile tormentor and pregnant with their first child.

As the saga of Pamela’s turbulent courtship and eventual marriage unfolded, Richardson introduced the theme of motherhood—and with it a new tension between Pamela’s moral nature and her physical body. It was Pamela’s maternal body that exposed her to impertinent and embarrassing comments as the characters around her made ribald jokes about what it was that she must have done to be in such a growing condition. As her sister-in-law joked, “What is done in Secret, shall be known on the House-top.” Pamela, of course, rose above it all with her virtue and gentle humility intact. At times her spiritual nature even seemed to transcend her body. Her husband once exclaimed, “You have no Body just now . . . your Spirit has absorb’d it all.” Pamela claimed motherhood as a state that enhanced her virtue and her selfless dedication to others. Yet the problem of the body still remained at every turn in Richardson’s novel. Was the female body a sexual body (subject always to dubious humor)? Or was it a reproductive body, subject to suffering and medical catastrophe? Was it a mirror to reflect the internal beauty of the soul? Richardson never resolved the problem of the body, but simply allowed his heroine intermittently to transcend her corporeality.

Another of Richardson’s massive novels, Clarissa (1747–48), also highlighted the appeal of the maternal body while simultaneously placing motherhood and sexuality in tension. Robert Lovelace, who attempted to force the virtuous heroine to marry him by drugging and raping her, effused to his best friend, “Let me perish, Belford, if I would not forego the brightest diadem in the world for the pleasure of seeing a twin Lovelace at each charming breast, drawing from it his first sustenance; the pious task, for physical reasons, continued for one month and no more!” Ostensibly focusing on the pleasure that the sight of the maternal body would grant him (anticipating the somewhat voyeuristic depictions of breastfeeding that would become common in maternal advice literature beginning in the late eighteenth century), Lovelace also referred to more corporeal pleasures to be gained from Clarissa. Wishing to reclaim his right to sexual intercourse with her, he praised the delights of lactation while limiting them to one month. After that, he implied, Clarissa’s body ought to be returned to him. Such passages suggested that the maternal body was indeed a very tangible object in eighteenth-century popular literature. In the mid-eighteenth century literary world, the figure of the good mother began to take shape as a symbol of female virtue, but not yet a disembodied one.
By the turn of the nineteenth century, readers encountered motherhood more often as it became a popular topic in magazines and volumes of poetry. Poems focusing on the charms, duties, and moral influence of the good mother became standard fare. One poem that was reprinted in various publications at the turn of the century offered a sensual portrait of motherhood that underscored its corporeal dimensions and allowed the reader to explore the body of the mother:

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;  

Excerpted from the eighteenth-century English poet and scientist Erasmus Darwin's set of poems, The Botanic Garden, these verses playfully unveiled the mother's physical charms and emphasized the enjoyment that mother and infant could gain from their mutual embrace. The infant in this poem displayed a proprietary pleasure in caressing the mother's breast, implying a greater emphasis on her physical attributes as a mother than on her moral or emotional influence. Another poem that was reprinted in several periodicals in the 1820s also evoked a sensual vision of breastfeeding with the words of a mother to her firstborn:

What! do thy little fingers leave the breast,  
The fountain which thy small lips press'd at pleasure?  
Couldst thou exhaust it, pledge of passion blest!  

Translated from the verses of Madame de Surville, a fifteenth-century French poet whose works were first published in the early nineteenth century, the poem repeatedly evoked the tender physical bond between mother and infant and made reference to the passion between husband and wife that resulted in the birth of a child.

But not all poems at this time were so sensual in their exploration of the maternal body. Poets also described the diligence of the good mother in caring for her children. Another poem from around the turn of the nineteenth century explored the corporeal work of a mother in protecting and entertaining her many children, giving a more pragmatic, if still sentimental, evocation of the daily activities of a mother:

While one with fondness she caresses,  
Her gentle hand his little brother
Softly to her bosom presses,
And her knee supports another.
See him climb:—her arms extended
Gives the feeble urchin aid;
While her outstretch’d foot suspended
For his sisters seat is made.\textsuperscript{58}

The “Good Mother” of this poem was occupied literally hand and foot with the activities of her children. Although the poem gave a sentimental portrait of a mother’s duties, appealing to the reader to sympathize with her loving gestures and feel the depth of her maternal love, it also hinted at the real and tiring work involved in mothering a large family. Another poem offered a rarer reference to the bodily suffering of childbirth with a doting mother speaking to her child:

Welcome, thou little dimpled stranger,
O, welcome to my fond embrace;
Thou sweet reward of pain and danger.\textsuperscript{59}

Juxtaposing the pain of childbirth with the pleasure of the maternal embrace, this poem offered readers a glimpse of the contradictory physical experiences of motherhood.

As time passed, these embodied depictions of motherhood became less frequent, although they could still occasionally be found into the 1830s and beyond. Sentimental poets continued at times to encourage readers to imagine the mother’s body by offering glimpses of motherly actions such as cradling, nursing, and embracing a child. One poem highlighted the mother’s Christian influence, but also evoked poignant visions of the mother-child bond by describing the infant’s “cheek, now soft reposing/On thy tender mother’s breast.”\textsuperscript{60} Occasionally a poem gestured to the work the mother did as a caretaker, for the good mother was always there to “wipe the cold sweat from off the brow;/The suffering form most gently move.”\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, one poem about a stepmother emphasized her caretaking role in order to identify her as a true mother, though not a biological one: “She sweetly kisses me, and smooths each straggling curl,/And makes me love her when she says, ‘You are my own sweet girl.’”\textsuperscript{62} These moments of physical intimacy generally focused on a single point of physical connection, such as a kiss, between mother and child that served to evoke the sincerity and selflessness of maternal love.
But by the 1830s, as poems about motherhood became increasingly popular, the mother developed into a newly disembodied character whose spiritual nature transcended the bounds of material existence. Motherhood poems generally came in two types at this time, the elegiac and the celebratory. The elegiac poem was the most common, a narrative of sacrifice and loss that memorialized the debility and death of the mother in order to arrive at a spiritualized vision of maternal perfection and influence. The poetic fantasy of the good mother took the most extreme forms of maternal sacrifice—death and the act of dying—and showed that they were the means to a more powerful end. Such poems participated in a larger culture of death and mourning that characterized nineteenth-century American society, in which elegies, portraits, and even items made with the hair of deceased loved ones all attested to a continuing link between the living and the dead.63

The celebratory and joyful evocations of motherhood, on the other hand, lauded the influence of the Christian mother, the joy that mothers and their children gained from one another, and the power of maternal love and influence. In these literary depictions the mother was young and lovely, as in the images examined above, but her physical attributes were overshadowed by her moral and spiritual virtues. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that her beauty was defined by her internal spirit. As the well-known educator and reformer William Alcott wrote, “There can be no doubt that beauty, or at least, a set of features that interests us, as somewhat agreeable, is generally connected with virtue and piety.” Thus the “morality of beauty,” as Alcott called it, moved beauty away from the specific characteristics of the body, such as those seen earlier in Erasmus Darwin’s sensuous verses, toward a beauty defined by interiority.64 This was an essential part of the culture of gentility that privileged internal character above all else. For instance, one celebratory poem gestured briefly to the mother’s physical traits before quickly invoking her interior virtues:

Young mother! On thy fair, majestic brow!
And, amid all its loftiness, revealing
Thy soul’s rich tenderness and depth of feeling.65

Thus her high forehead, a sign of intellect and virtue, rapidly shifted from being a significant feature of the mother’s physical beauty to being the primary signifier of her inner beauty.
In both elegiac and celebratory poems about mothers, the focus usually fell not on her physical charms or the work of her body, but on more ethereal and disembodied qualities such as her smile, her voice, and her enduring love. Her “ethereal noncorporeality,” to borrow a phrase from Marianne Noble, manifested itself in a number of ways and identified her as a transcendent mother, the pinnacle of sentimental motherhood. In one poem, aptly titled “A Mother’s Smile,” the mother was simultaneously absent from the poem and constituted its structural and rhetorical anchor:

There are scenes and sunny places
On which feeling loves to dwell,
There are many happy faces
Who have known and loved us well;
But ’mid joy or ’mid dejection,
There is nothing can beguile,
That can show the fond affection
Of a mother’s welcome smile.

Enumerating in general terms the grief and trials that characterized adult life, the poem insisted that the key to hope and resilience was the radiance of a mother’s smile. Anchoring the end of each stanza, the mother’s smile shimmered like that of a sentimental Cheshire cat, appearing as needed and unattached to any tangible maternal figure. A disembodied smile could beguile and reassure but had little agency and no personhood, suggesting that the mother was not so much an active participant in the world as she was a cherished influence.

The trope of the mother’s voice offered a similarly noncorporeal vision of maternal influence, although it did offer the literary mother some possibility for self-expressive agency. Existing always as an echo, a memory, or a fantasy, the mother’s gentle tones guided loved ones toward greater piety, evoking the notion of women’s religious influence that had become a centerpiece of evangelical religion. In one poem the author remembered how a mother’s “voice of gentle love first led me up in prayer / To the pure fount of bliss, and bade me quench my longings there.” Thus the mother was remembered and revered for her pious influence on her children. The mother’s voice could also be a persistent presence, even from beyond the grave:

I might forget her melting prayer,
While pleasure’s pulses madly fly;
But in the still, unbroken air,
Her gentle tones come stealing by—
And years of sin and manhood flee,
And leave me at my mother's knee.69

For this poet the voice was as abstract as “healing sent on wings of sleep,” yet it held more power and was more enduring than the memory of the mother’s prayer. The mother’s exact words were inessential and easily forgotten; the influence of her voice alone was eternal. Coming from beyond the grave, a mother’s voice, like her smile, was a memory that brought comfort to the sorrowful, for

It was a mother’s gentle voice
Communing with a daughter’s heart,
While bidding that sad one rejoice,
And every sorrowing thought depart.70

The trope of the mother’s voice gave her the ability to speak even after death, thus transforming her into a powerful spiritual presence that transcended the bounds of mortality. Her voice served as a guide, leading loved ones along a path of piety and pure living: “a voice is in my heart,” as one poet mused.71 Indeed, such poems seemed to suggest that the mother had more influence as a spirit than as a living member of the family.

The most abstract element of the transcendent mother was her “mother’s love”: “A noble, pure, and tender flame / Enkindled from above,” it was the essence of sentimental motherhood.72 The mother’s love was not merely an emotion—it was divinely ordained, and it had a presence of its own. As one poet mused:

We felt the atmosphere of love,
A mother’s presence brings,
And safe, as if an angel form
Had wrapped us with his wings.73

A mother’s love could have a powerful agency of its own and constituted the most potent aspect of the mother’s presence. As the Reverend E. P. Dyer of Massachusetts wrote for an issue of the Mother’s Assistant:

In the golden days of childhood, there was one who loved me well;—
One, whose love had mighty power with me, and bound me like a spell;

When the shadows round the sunset fall, as day retires to rest,
Then it glitters, like a diamond-pin, upon the evening's breast;—
With the beauty of that queenly gem, before its beams depart,—
Shines the jewel of Maternal Love, in thee a Mother's Faithful Heart.\textsuperscript{74}

Syntactically, this poem elided the presence of the mother by making love
the grammatical subject, which held “mighty power,” before shifting quickly
to ethereal visions of maternal love as a jewel, creating vivid associations
with the heavens. The mother’s love acted powerfully in life, but it gained
a new and more heavenly power after death. In essence, maternal love was
next to divine love. Another poem specifically repudiated the body of the
mother in favor of her love and piety:

\begin{quote}
A Mother’s Love!—Oh! never, sure
Did sweeter, or more holy feeling
A flame from earthly dross so pure,
On this our sinful earth find dwelling;
A coin so free from base alloy:
A love so near to that above;
Angels might covet to enjoy
A pious Mother’s tender Love!\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Developing the binary between flesh and spirit, earth and heaven, the poet
elevated maternal love by drawing a parallel with divine love. Thus a
mother’s love—“free from earthly dross”—was the secret to her everlasting
power and influence, but only if she were a pious and virtuous woman whose
influence emanated from her Christian example.

The abstract symbols of maternal virtue—the mother’s smile, voice, and
love—emphasized the ethereal and spiritual nature of the mother and rep-
resented her with metaphors of abundance and endurance. The transcen-
dent mother was everlasting in her virtue and influence, for her highest
qualities could not be tarnished by time or death. As one poet wrote, “My
mother pressed my hand, and looked a sad, a last farewell, / And shed a tinge
upon my thoughts that time can ne’er dispel.”\textsuperscript{76} While the mother herself
was gone, she persisted in the thoughts of her children. Another poem was
more specific about the mother’s enduring presence:

\begin{quote}
There’s music in a mother’s voice,
More sweet than breezes sighing,
There’s kindness in a mother’s glance,
Too pure for ever dying.
\end{quote}
The most cherished qualities of the good mother were everlasting. Moreover, as the next verses suggested, the qualities of the good mother were infinite and could never be depleted:

There's love within a mother's breast,
So deep 'tis overflowing,
And care for those she calls her own,
That's ever, ever growing.\(^{77}\)

The metaphor of flowing water and fountains became the standard trope for evoking infinite maternal affection. As one poet mused:

Beautiful, is it not—this sketch,
Of true domestic bliss,
The fountain of maternal love,
Welling with happiness?\(^{78}\)

Such metaphors brought images of nature—water, fountains, and ever-renewing growth—to the forefront, associating maternal virtue with natural abundance and eternal growth. But these secular sentimental images were always tinged with religious meaning—the fountain of maternal love provided the key to heaven, for maternal influence was the conduit linking the human and the divine.

Thus in spite of her associations with nature—reminiscent of Enlightenment ideology that associated virtue with the natural world—the Christian impulse was the single most important characteristic of the transcendent mother. It was this impulse that transformed her from “earthly dross” to a spiritual figure in sentimental poetry, giving her infinite and enduring qualities a divine aspect. It was also in the context of Christian piety that the nineteenth-century literary mother possessed the most agency and the strongest voice. One poem, entitled “A Mother’s Prayer, on the Birth of Her Child,” offered up the mother’s own voice in prayer for the future piety of her infant:

Let me, while thy features viewing,
Breathe to heav’n my fervent pray’r.
Ev’ry worldly thought subduing,
Make an int’rest for thee there.\(^{79}\)

This was a common theme in poems about mothers: the mother gained a voice through prayer, and by praying she and her loved ones were drawn
up into the spiritual realm. Another poem used the dying mother’s “good-by” to stand in for a whole constellation of Christian teachings:

My mother’s “good-by”—it comes to me
Like a peace-be-still to the troubled sea;
And when passions would sway, or temptations entice,
I hear the sound of a warning voice,
“My son, this world is a world of sin,
And there’s many a tempting vice therein,
But shun them all, and their presence fly,
And God will protect thee—Good-by, good-by!”

In the context of prayer or pious didacticism the mother gained a voice, but only for the dissemination of Christian sentiments. Her individual personhood and subjectivity disappeared in the spiritual essence of her “good-by,” which reminded her children to mind their ways and follow her pious teachings.

The feelings and utterances of the Christian mother in sentimental poetry were most often bound up with death and the process of dying. In many poems it was the mother whose “sands of life were ebbing—/Ebbing—ebbing fast away,” or whose grave formed the centerpiece of the poem, but it could also be the death of a child that gave the poem its emotional weight.

Poems about dead and dying mothers were at the heart of poetic depictions of motherhood. Indeed, roughly one-third of all the motherhood poems published in *Godey’s* between 1830 and 1850 featured deceased or dying mothers. In poems about deceased mothers, the body of the mother was literally absent—replaced in the text by a gravestone or by a specific memory or location. The poem “My Mother’s Grave,” for instance, described the sentiments aroused where

A mound of waving grass was near,
A grave, made in the clay,
A holy spot to memory dear,
Beneath, my mother lay.

In this particular case, nature replaced the maternal body, for it was Nature who embraced the narrator and “pillowed in her tender arms/My sad and tearful face.” Yet it was the memory of the good mother that made the spot holy, joining together personal sorrow and pious reverence to highlight the enduring influence of the mother.
Maternal death poems often featured the wasting and disappearance of the mother’s body, which revealed the process by which she became a spiritual figure, unfettered by corporeality. Maternal mortality was, of course, a devastatingly real aspect of life in the nineteenth century, and many women had friends and kinswomen who had died in childbirth or from related complications. We can imagine that one way of making sense of these losses and of the fears women faced when they anticipated the trials of childbearing was to sentimentalize death and spiritualize the mother. If the essence of the mother was in her spirit rather than her material form, then she could never wholly perish, nor would she ever be wholly absent from her children. Motherhood poems emphasized that as the mother herself wasted away, her piety and influence on her children grew. The mother’s enduring influence could be fully realized only in death. A poem by Lydia Sigourney featured the mother’s deathbed and her last conversation with her children, who could not understand why

Their mother in such feeble whisper spake,  
Broken with sighs and why her wasted cheek  
Was pale as marble.

The mother’s feeble voice, her pallor and wasted figure, and her glowing eyes all spoke to the slow, genteel disappearance of the body. When the body disappeared, her soul could take flight:

With a wondrous lustre in her eye,  
The last, bright sunbeam of a mother’s love,  
Ere it became seraphic, the freed soul,  
High o’er the bondage of all earthly ties,  
Went forth with hallelujahs, at the call  
Of its Redeemer.

The heart of the poem was the mother’s transformation from mortal woman to spirit, from “emaciate hand” to “freed soul.” Indeed, at the center of maternal death poems was the sought-after release from the trials of the flesh. Such poems presumed that the lot of the mother was one of suffering, though such suffering was rarely linked specifically to the physical challenges of childbearing. One poem told of the hurried baptism of an infant just before the death of his mother; the fact that her death came so soon after his birth signaled that her demise was related to complications in childbirth, but such scenarios were rare in sentimental poems, and
poets never alluded to the specific physical complications that led to death or debility.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus it was that through death the mother was transformed into a spirit, a figure of surpassing virtue who had greater power and influence from on high than ever she possessed on earth. As one contemporary put it, “A mother is, next to God, all powerful.”\textsuperscript{86} Her memory and the echoes of her voice in prayer could lead loved ones along the path of righteousness, and her grave remained as a symbol of the transformation from flesh to spirit. What was perhaps most remarkable about this ostensibly powerful spiritual figure, however, was her passivity; the transcendent mother did almost nothing. As one contemporary women’s rights activist critically noted of American society, “Woman’s influence... is held to be of far more importance than woman’s self—her influence being regarded as the end of her being, and herself as an incident only.”\textsuperscript{87} The transcendent mother was the object of other forces—illness, grief, pain—but she was rarely an active subject. Disembodied, often voiceless, her mere existence and her moral nature were what made her powerful.

The tropes that characterized sentimental poetry appeared frequently in prose pieces as well, although these texts showed less uniformity in their focus and imagery. One short piece, for instance, tapped into the image of the praying mother as a powerful memory and influence in the lives of her children: “I have a vivid recollection of the effect of maternal influence. . . . I seemed to hear the very tones of her voice; and when I recollected some of her expressions, I burst into tears, arose from my bed, and fell upon my knees just on the spot where my mother kneeled.”\textsuperscript{88} Like the sentimental poems that evoked the voice of the pious mother, this piece envisioned her as a potent memory, an influence that was stronger in death than in life. Similar testimonies appeared regularly, evoking the memory of a mother’s voice or touch as a talisman against vice later in life.\textsuperscript{89} Another short piece created an image of perfect maternal love by comparing it to the abundance of flowing water: the mother “folded the happy babe to her warm and throbbing breast. She felt a gush of pure enjoyment in that sacred moment, such as flows from no spring save that of a mother’s heart.”\textsuperscript{90} Such images were virtually identical to those found in sentimental poems, but they were often mixed with a diverse array of pragmatic advice about mothering, didactic stories, or dogmatic pronouncements about maternal duty. Indeed, what makes sentimental poetry uniquely interesting is the consistency in the imagery used to depict the transcendent mother, which resulted in a particularly potent message about women’s spiritual power and influence.
Sentimental poetry condensed an array of ideas and images of motherhood into one densely emotional form.

Depictions of white genteel motherhood in images and verse offer a fascinating window into the evolution of the transcendent mother as the pinnacle of feminine virtue in popular sentimental print culture. The frequency with which the trope of the transcendent mother appeared suggests that she filled an important need in American society. Existing in a class- and race-specific location, the transcendent mother demonstrated that white middle-class culture was rooted in Christian piety and genteel values. This must have been comforting at a time when many middle-class Americans felt buffeted by rapid economic and social changes and by the dislocations of growing individualism and geographic mobility. The transcendent mother reconnected individuals to domestic and Christian values and to a vision of a more enduring emotional and spiritual realm separated from the bustle of the world. Envisioning motherhood in these terms allowed readers to cherish an enchanting vision of order and morality in a rapidly changing society and to elide the aspects of maternity that challenged feminine ideologies of virtue, restraint, and maternal devotion.

Of course, this fantasy of transcendence created a script that was impossible for women to follow. As Marianne Noble writes, “The ideal of female noncorporeality promises the true woman a social position of the first importance . . . but leaves that position ever vulnerable to the incessant assault of her own body.”91 Childbearing women—even those who were young, white, genteel, and lovely—could never actually transcend their bodies. Motherhood as women lived it was not easy or unproblematic, and they could not accomplish the work of mothering by simply wafting about their maternal love and moral influence. Swollen ankles, unwieldy bellies, and leaking breasts provided constant reminders of the physicality of motherhood, and the fatigue and frustrations of mothering must have made many women feel at times as if their influence as mothers was negligible at best and that it was a poor return for the physical trials of maternity.

But these literary and visual representations of transcendent motherhood were meant to inspire and uplift readers and viewers, helping them cultivate inner virtues and understand their work as mothers from a more expansive spiritual perspective. Unfortunately, we know little of the specific reactions women might have had to these depictions of motherhood. These images and texts were enormously popular, but what did they mean to the
mother who paused in the middle of her busy day to contemplate a beautiful image of a mother and child? Isabelle Lehuu has argued that we should not read these depictions as actual representations of women’s self-image as wives and mothers, but view them “rather as texts that the reader-viewers were appropriating, enjoying, and approving.”92 Based on women’s own writings about motherhood, this assessment seems accurate. Women were under no illusions about the challenges and the hard work involved in motherhood, but as they tended their children and managed their own reproductive bodies, they could also enjoy the imagined tranquility and the powerful influence of the transcendent mother.