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The Moral Politics of Infancy:
Formation of a Protestant Maternity in England, ca. 1550-1650

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The image of the English nurse or nanny is iconic enough to the point of ubiquity in literature and our cultural conceptions of mid-modern England. We see her in classic novels, as Jane Eyre's cold caretaker, or the magical singing Mary Poppins, characters often more central to plot lines than the parents of the children in question. Even modern classics like Downton Abbey do not neglect to show Nanny bringing the infant children to afternoon tea, a time when mother, and perhaps even father, can hold and admire them for a few choice minutes before sending them back off to the nursery upstairs. These images were not born in a vacuum; they reflect centuries of childrearing traditions in England, traditions kept mostly within the upper classes of society but not entirely unfamiliar to some families of middle class status. And hundreds of years before the common image of the English nanny and nurse appeared in popular culture, there was already a tradition of women raising their children with help from other women, specifically by employing midwives and raising infants with wet nurses.

There is a wealth of scholarship that revolves around wet nurses and childbirth in Western Europe and the Americas, but it centers on a later time period than will be discussed here; most of that scholarship is focused on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Certain historians who have focused on this time period point out the demonization of the wet nurse figure and even the development of government regulations for wet-nursing, as it became more and more popular; others examine the intersection of culture practice and social theory with medicine and how it influenced breastfeeding and wet nursing. Inquiries of the latter sort have

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1 Lissa Cowan’s The Secret Life of Wet Nurses in 18th Century France uses the method of microhistory, combined with broader research on perceptions of infancy, to bring light to the lives of wet nurses and mothers and the growth of the phenomenon as its own industry. “A History of Infant Feeding” by Emily E. Stevens in The Journal of Perinatal Education (2009 Spring, vol. 18, 32-39) examines not only the sweeping history of wet nursing but discusses the often-negative perception of wet nurses (as uncaring, lazy, or even usurping the child’s affection away from its mother) and popular anxieties mothers and doctors held at the time. Janet Golden’s book, A Social History of Wet Nursing in America, discusses the intersection of social and cultural practices with medicine, as it
been integral in shaping my own research of cultural intersections with motherhood and infant care. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show an established practice of wet nursing and a codified rulebook for ways to raise a child, depending on one’s class.² Keeping this in mind, it is more revealing to examine the years before this, when ideas were developing and shifting, and new social rules were implemented as a result.

Of course, questions about raising infants are commonplace across many time frames and all locations around the globe, and are certainly not secluded to England. High infant mortality rates and a pre-medical world necessitate such inquiries simply as a means to lineage survival. However, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries present more than just questions; they represent a shift in culture and ideology that cannot be separated from concurrent questions regarding the Church and religion in post-Reformation England (here, approximately 1550-1650). Infant care questions are especially prevalent during this time period, when ideas about morality were being reshaped and reinterpreted, and male intellectuals and mothers alike involved themselves in the construction of new conceptions of motherhood.

The century following the advent of the Reformation in Europe was, unquestionably, a period of intense religious and social upheaval. The whole of Western Europe grappled with "the struggle for conscience, the clash of faiths, [and] the disintegration of Christian unity" as intellectuals, clergymen, and laymen alike endeavored to define right and wrong in their church

related to wet nursing in early America. Her work describes medical science as a function of cultural authority, physicians’ abilities to influence child-rearing practices, and most importantly the social construction of motherhood. Golden’s method of examining child-rearing and feeding has been an important factor in shaping my own research questions.

and in their locale.\textsuperscript{3} Much of this, naturally, had to do with church-specific practices and interpretations of theological texts. Nevertheless, it is clear that certain attitudes toward morality, and specifically religious morality, seeped into everyday life as well, specifically the traditional home, where married men and women were expected to have children and raise a family. These ideals were formalized through argumentative texts, and are made notable by their sudden appearance (and undoubtedly, their appearance speaks also in large part to the increased availability and distribution of print media via the printing press after the 15\textsuperscript{th} century). Still, the popularity and prevalence of this subject is notable and interesting: why the sudden need for an academic or religious approach to childrearing, instead of reliance on wisdom of local matriarchal elders and community conventions? There are many new texts that appeared in England during this time period-- roughly the century following the Reformation, about 1550 to 1650-- that dictate very explicit rules on the correct way to raise children. The rules are in regard to infant care and breastfeeding, at this time for members of the upper class (the elite urbanites, often of London, and the noble), who would have the opportunity to read them and could afford to make decisions about hiring a nurse. Many texts, ranging from medical treatises to argumentative pamphlets, address concerns about a mother's involvement in feeding her own child, or otherwise discuss the criteria of a wet nurse who might be hired to act as a stand-in. Furthermore, they all contain religious language or Biblical lessons, used to varying degrees depending on the author. The existence of these texts, and the debates they contain, points to a larger social pattern within England, and is revealing of sometimes-competing cultural norms that dictated expectations for how women should live in the world and the entanglement of motherhood with piety.

The texts examined here, spanning from 1550 to 1650, are representative of different cultural angles. Men and women of the educated and upper strata of society wrote them, but the texts reveal the voices of mothers, academics, and members of the clergy. Their audience is not just educated men; some speak specifically to women, although men are never left out of the discussion either. The timeframe of 1550 to 1650 follows the English Reformation, beginning with the ascension of Edward VI and his introduction of a Protestant service in England based on his Book of Common Prayer, through the ascension of peace-maker Queen Elizabeth I, ending with Oliver Cromwell’s suppression of Catholicism in Ireland; in short, a time when Protestantism was generally accepted and furthered. Each selected text requires a close reading as well as analysis of them as an integrated group, to draw connections to larger themes they unveil.

Reading these texts furthers our understanding of the culturally-centered expectations of women: their roles as mothers, and how small actions such as breastfeeding or wet-nursing a child affected how 'well' they played their role according to society. The questions they raise indicate an importance and emphasis on maternal actions; why the emphasis on this aspect of motherhood? More importantly, though, they reveal how these roles and rules were formed out of their larger social framework, one that formed new conceptions of a new type of maternity and family. Analysis of these texts, combined with appropriate discussion about England’s Reformation, reveals how religion drove these ideas into being.

These texts are a useful framework through which to view the English Reformation at the family level, and they indicate the differences in power and authority across different genders and professional identities as they discuss and interpret religion and maternity. It becomes

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apparent that religion, power, and maternity are all interconnected, though in manners and uses that differ between authors, depending on their personal identities and perspectives. Reformation ideals about family placed the impetus of familial religion on mothers’ abilities to practice maternity through childbirth and infant rearing; piety and babies become one in the same, leading to a morality no longer equated with celibacy, but with motherhood.

II. The Reformation and English Family Life

The Reformation marks a disruption in religious life, and as religion was an important and lively part of life for an overwhelming majority of Judeo-Christian Europeans, religious life is social life for the congregation. Thus the Reformation deserves to be viewed in a holistic light—that is to say, it would be inaccurate to view it as its own sphere, only touching political or religious institutions and figures of authority. Broad histories tend to naturally focus on such figures and institutions, and thus a broad overview of the English Reformation might only focus on those in power: Henry VIII, Bishops, the Pope, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. This “Great Man” method of examining and reporting history—that is, histories that look to political institutions, power structures, and those who head them as having the largest, most meaningful effect on entire societies—risks telling an incomplete story that glosses over elements of society that can, by close study, offer their own contributions and insights to historical events and trends. A holistic approach to history allows us to understand the true dimensionality of human civilizations; this trend of social history has become more popular in the last thirty or so years, and has influenced historians’ work on the English Reformation as well.5 The methodology

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5 The influence is best noted through juxtaposition. A.G. Dickens writes *The English Reformation* (1964) in a traditional style that focuses almost exclusively on men in positions of political and religious power. Author and editor Christopher Haigh later (1987) collected essays for
employed in this paper necessitates a non-traditional approach to the Reformation not as an event created and effected by political or clerical figures in charge, but as a phenomenon that was not so top-down, in that areas of social life experienced by everyday peoples are indicative of the far-reaching effects of Reformation attitudes, anxieties, and upheavals in the traditional religious power structure. Therefore it is unnecessary to discuss here the Reformation in all its broadness; instead, focused information on social (especially as it pertains to women and individuals of non-clerical status) changes influenced by the Reformation serve as more useful accompaniment to the close readings performed later on.

One important aspect of the Reformation to note is how it challenged which parts of religion should be reserved for ‘experts only.’ Traditional Catholicism of pre-Reformation Europe was an institution, and thus was inherently hierarchical, beginning with the center of power as Rome and the Pope as the all-encompassing authority. Figureheads of the Church, and its priests, decided all of the values, teachings and Biblical interpretations that were then relayed in Sunday mass to congregations. One of the most important aspects of the Reformation was that it challenged this coveting and distilling of information, by asserting that laypeople can and should read and interpret the Bible themselves, and that an institution was not what decided and delineated faith in a Christian God.6

However, other changes brought by the Reformation are subtler to tease out, as they manifested in ways that did not relate to or influence rules about church or the Bible. The social implications of the Reformation are included in this, although there is ample scholarship to conclude that the Reformation brought a myriad of social changes for figures in power,

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individuals, and families alike. An entirely new take on family life, especially women as mothers, was born out of the Reformation. Steven Ozment’s *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* discusses how the views of celibacy and reproduction were shifted during this time. Catholicism coveted celibacy and purity—virtues gained by joining a monastery or cloister—as values that made the person who adopted them more holy, more Christian and more moral. Protestantism, though, did not think so highly of celibacy and monastic life. Ozment explains, “As far as the reformers were concerned, opportunities for marriage abounded; the rapid marriages of so many former monks and nuns in the 1520s seemed proof enough. …Fathers were instructed by the new clergy to find proper mates for all their daughters. …To them [celibacy] contradicted both the Bible and human nature.” This refocused religious (ie. moral) ideals closer to the individual and the family unit. Additionally, it suggests the idea that reproduction is an important part of human life that is not, within the confines of a marriage, unnatural or undesired, but the opposite. Instead of raising women who would strive to lead their most holy life by devoting herself to celibacy and life in a cloister, in this light women have a responsibility to marry and to become mothers. This requirement is not just one of human nature, but is reinforced through a Protestant interpretation of the Bible. And so, while Protestant ideals gave women some agency in reading and interpreting the Bible, at the same time it removed the religious institution of the cloister in which women were able to hold authority and positions of leadership, leading to the refocusing of a woman’s natural role solely as mother and wife.

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7 Works that emphasize the figureheads and political change-makers of the English Reformation include A.G. Dickens’ work *The English Reformation; Early Modern England 1485-1714* by Robert Bucholz and Newton Key; and Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *The Reformation: A History*. Conversely, many works focus on the effects of the Reformation on laypeople in England, seen in Ethan H. Shagan’s *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*; and Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*.

Looking more closely at women and maternity is appropriate, then, in understanding the broad sweep of Protestantism across the social spectrum. The essay collection *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England* declares in its opening, “Despite arguments that the eighteenth century served as a formative period in the creation of modern notion of maternity and mothering, the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth century manifested intensive social, cultural, and religious concern about maternity and the maternal subject…” There is no better evidence for this than texts that demonstrate such concerns; there exists many, but the following are grouped for their ability to recreate a conversation around a topic, namely infant feeding and concepts of maternal duty. The authors, as they are from varied interests and backgrounds, represent different identities and roles within literate society, and in turn, those identities shape interpretations, decisions and arguments that each written text offers.

III. The Texts

The Countess of Lincoln's Nurserie

Published in 1622 but undoubtedly written decades before that year, “The Countess of Lincoln's Nurserie” is a persuasive text written by noblewoman Elizabeth Clinton. Clinton, often referred to in her day as Lady Fitzgerald, was entrenched in English Court life for much of her adolescence and adulthood. She was born in 1528, in Ireland, and died at age sixty-one in 1589 in England, approximately fifteen years after becoming a countess upon her husband’s ascension to upper-class status as the Earl of Lincoln. The wealth of information that exists regarding the Countess is likely due to her association with not only the nobility (when she was

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10 It is unclear why this text was posthumously published.
about ten years old, the Earl of Surrey penned a poem that refers to her beauty and virtue) but particularly Queen Elizabeth; she was, from the beginning of the Queen’s reign, a lady in waiting.\textsuperscript{12}

It is, unfortunately, unclear when Clinton’s “The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie” was actually written. The document is undated save its publishing information--1622 at Oxford University-- though of course it was undoubtedly written some time before her death in 1589. Her purpose for writing is intriguing in that it is so specific; she writes a direct argument that spells out her opinions on infant feeding, beseeching maternal readers to breastfeed their own children (at this time, the attractive-to-many alternative was to employ a wet nurse). The text reads almost as a sermon: it is personal yet instructional, and primarily focused on virtue and high morals—in fact, it is addressed “to the courteous, most chiefly Christian, reader.”\textsuperscript{13}

The methods, as well, are equally clerical in nature, as Clinton’s argument relies entirely on Biblical evidence and interpretation. Part of her self-awarded authority on the matter is gleaned from her personal experience as a mother. She explains, “…it hath pleased God to blesse me with many children, and so caused me to observe many things falling out to mothers, and to their children…”\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, Clinton admits that she did not breastfeed her own children, which she blames on ill advise given to her at the time, and the over-ruling of some unspoken authority figure in her life. Perhaps this is indicative of a new ability to seize her own fate and authority: powerless before, as a new mother, she finds power now to write this text and persuade other

\textsuperscript{12} Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.
\textsuperscript{13} Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln. The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie, Early English Books Online. Page 4. In quoting this text, I have tried to keep as closely to the original spelling as is possible, barring some changes for my own convenience. Thus I have kept all of the spellings of words as they appear in the text, with the exception of symbols that refer to different English alphabetical letters today; for example, I have replaced ‘v’ with the proper ‘u’ that it would be today, and β or the descending ſ with a single or double ’s’ as is appropriate to contemporary English spelling.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 5.
mothers not to make her same mistakes. She sees breastfeeding as a motherly duty which she was unable to fulfill, and now urges other mothers to avoid her neglected duty. By doing so, she is still in some part fulfilling her duty as a mother, as she informs others and seeks to influence their decisions as a way to foster a natural, proper maternity as she sees it.

Her experience as a mother is not the only means by which Clinton establishes authority; she also uses her ability as a layperson to examine and interpret Biblical texts, which she uses as the backbone of her argument. At its core, the “Nurserie” text seeks to persuade readers that examples, found in the Bible, of mothers nursing their children are not only compelling but are demonstrative of all mothers’ duty to do the same if they are to consider themselves truly virtuous, Christian women. The more important and convincing examples, for her, are those Biblical women who have breastfed their children: listed as Eve, Sarah the wife of Abraham, Hannah, and the Virgin Mary. She poses a question for the reader, asking “Now who shall deny the own mothers suckling of their owne children to bee their duty, since every godly matron hath walked in these steps before them [?]”\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, she points out that these Biblical women did not necessarily operate from a place of ease, reminding readers that, although in general the time period she refers to were “lesse corrupted times”, some of these mothers were disadvantaged, or otherwise of a social class that may not have been compelled to breastfeed their own children.\textsuperscript{16} She describes, for example, the aforementioned Hannah as having “much affliction of minde” and Sarah as being “so great a Princesse”.\textsuperscript{17} In doing so, one may assume that the Countess is emphasizing that breastfeeding your child is still viable, and according to God righteous and compulsory, when one’s health is somewhat imperfect. Health was one of many factors considered when women chose how to feed their infant children; others include,

\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth Clinton, \textit{The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie} 7.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid} 7 and 6.
but are not limited to, fear of pain, fear of premature aging, and fear of changes in breast appearance.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, the emphasis on religious duty in Clinton’s writing points to a divine mandate on motherhood, an idea which supports the Protestant values of reproduction and the family unit. Religion and one’s purpose are intertwined: women are destined to be mothers, and their role as nurturers is as much religious as it is biological.

This is not the only Reformation ideal one can recognize in the text; such ideals also serve Clinton in that they give her authority to write a persuasive text such as this. Clinton’s writing drips with religion. After a few dedication pages written to “the approved virtuous”\textsuperscript{19} Bridget Countess of Linolne, Clinton addresses the more general, albeit Christian (as quoted above) audience. She believes that that “to write of this manner, so farre as God shall please to direct me” is her duty as a Christian, even that God has directed her, in some way, to do so; in a similar way, it “is the duty of nursing due by mothers to their owne children.”\textsuperscript{20} It is clear that the foundation of this text, from Clinton’s authority as its author to the actions it requires of its readers, are all bound up in the duty that she sees as coming from God by way of the Bible and the blessings of the children she has. This way of thinking is very indicative of Reformation attitudes; although she can be considered a laywoman, Clinton still considers herself a woman of authority on religion, able to understand what God wants for her and able to interpret the Bible in her own way; this is a huge shift from pre-Reformation attitudes that held that the clergy were the receivers and interpreters of God’s will. First, she claims she is directed by God to make this argument. Previously, in the clerical culture fostered by Catholicism, only the clergy had the knowledge or the right to interpret the will of God, and thus their job as interpreters was to make

\textsuperscript{19} Elizabeth Clinton, \textit{The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie 2}.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.} 7.
clear this information to the rest of the congregation. Second, Clinton takes this new idea even further by demonstrating that she can be a trusted authority on the Bible. Her argument relies on her ability to interpret the Bible directly by drawing her own connections to the text, rather than relying on a member of the clergy (for example a minister) to spell out those connections in a sermon.

It would be exhaustive to quote all of the instances in which she uses God or the Bible as support for her argument, because this is what the entire text does. Additionally, Clinton little mention of the supposed harms of employing a wet nurse, other than describing it as “an unnatural practice.” She cites many wet nurses as having deficiencies in their character—that is, they are namely liars. She claims to have seen nurses “pretending sufficiency of milk when indeed they had too much scarcity; pretending willingness when…indeed they have been most willful, …and most slothfull.”

Under which circumstances she has been personally privy to such nurses, and any further elaboration of those nurses’ characters and occupations, goes unmentioned. Using religion to argue about what today is considered a medical issue emphasizes that there was no disconnection between those subjects at this time. A revisionist may view this text, then, simply as a weakly supported argument that fails to adequately address an obvious counterargument. I would propose, instead, that Clinton’s ability to write and publish a piece like this shows how much emphasis and authority was placed on the Bible and Christian morality, that it stands by itself as a credible and important source and needs no further context or proof.

Even further, it is possibly indicative of a sort of liberation brought out by the Reformation: that laypeople, even laywomen, have the authority to examine the Bible, discuss God’s will, and project these religiously-driven opinions out to a public audience. It has been

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argued that women from the earliest Christian times used positions of power within the Christian hierarchy to achieve enough authority to carry previously inaccessible actions such as writing plays and opinion pieces. It is feasible, then, that by freeing the individual to interpret religion themselves, the Reformation cleared some space for women to have authority and agency within the context of subjects dealing specifically with morality or connecting to religious duty (even as it took away a female’s ability to occupy spaces of religious authority in cloisters, as mystics, or members of confraternities). An ability to read and interpret Biblical texts allowed women like Clinton to address issues that inherently affected women’s bodies, and to have intellectual authority while doing so.

The Childbirth or Woman’s Lecture

Christopher Hooke, author of *The Childbirth or Woman’s Lecture*, presents an interesting marriage of medicine and religion, as Hooke was both a Puritan minister and physician. Published in London in the year 1590 to be sold in a churchyard, the text truly is a lecture; unlike Culpeper’s *Midwife*, which instructed with prose accompanied by enumerated observations and instructions, Hooke’s *Woman’s Lecture* is twenty-five pages of compact block paragraphs, broken only by the Biblical citations in the left- and right-hand margins: Gen. 3:16, Ephe. 4:39, Luke 8:90—there is a total of over seventy such notes. If Hooke was to be considered equal parts minister and medic, each identity its own sphere of influence, his written work does not reflect

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22 Examples of this argument are widespread in regards to the time and place of their focus. The following sources offer a good starting place to understanding how women used their roles as participants in the Judeo-Christian religious hierarchy to accomplish tasks they might not otherwise have had the ability or authority to do, most notably seen in: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, “The Establishment of the Monastery of Gandersheim,” in *Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Thomas Head (New York and London, 2000); “The First Christians” in *From Jesus to Christ*. Film. Frontline series by PBS, 1998.

that whatsoever—indicative of the lack of separation between science and religion at the time. The title page reveals Hooke’s status as a minister right away, as the text is subtitled “A Lecture upon Chap. 1. Ver. 57, 58, of the holie Gospel according to Luke;”. And yet, the text is marked as a medical document as well, which one may see from the medical caduceus on the elaborate seal pressed into the title page. Surely this gives Hooke some sort of double authority—the intellectual acumen of a medical doctor, cemented with detailed and measured spirituality. One could further infer that it is no coincidence that Hooke’s lecture is on the Gospel of Luke, as Luke was not only a disciple but a doctor as well.24

Hooke’s Woman’s Lecture reads like a sermon even more than Elizabeth Clinton’s Nurserie, further solidifying the interwoven nature of medicine and religion at this time. This text is very different from the other two treated in this discussion; instead of creating an argument and supplementing it with Biblical evidence, Hooke takes a section of scripture and builds his argument along those lines. Perhaps it can be attributed to the stylistic preferences of a Puritan minister, or maybe it is a more direct way to interpret scripture. Hooke seems less concerned with making one argument than with providing an overview of the ways in which women’s fertility and birth experiences have historically (that is, Biblically) been directly influenced by God. In one of many assertions along these lines, Hooke employs the example of Rachel and Jacob, and explains, “Children therefore…come of God; without whole blessing a woman remaineth barren, not able to conceive; or conceiving, without strength to bring forth her fruit.”25 The second lesson of the sermon is that the generosity of God’s actions should inspire everyone to praise and recognize Him even more. He argues:

24 Colossians 4:14, NT.
But to tell forth what the Lord hath done for our soules, as did David, what great things Jesus hath done for us, as did the possessed what great mercies he hath shewed upon us, as Elizabeth here did: or what deliverances, benefies, and blessings he hat, and still dayly doth bestowe upon us, and our land, that thereby we might the rather stirre up our selves and others to praise the Lord, to pray for the continuance of his loving kindnes towards us...26

So then, the Bible serves the function of both showing readers and believers what faith and devotion may bring to an individual by way of personal blessings, but also as a cause for celebration of a higher power’s benevolence (and again, the wish that good Christians like them might reap similar rewards). This pattern of citing a Biblical figure or story, and distilling its message for the audience, repeats over and over again for the length of the text as a sermon would—much in keeping with its promise to lecture on the Gospel of Luke.

It bears acknowledging the fact that, unlike a spoken sermon crafted for a varied audience on Sundays, this lecture is directed towards and written for women. On the title page, Hooke deems it “necessarie to bee read and knowne of all young married and teeming [breeding] Women, and not unprofitable for men of all sortes.”27 This is both unusual and revealing: it is Hooke’s means exercising of religious authority to talk about a subject, but importantly, that subject (maternity, fertility, childbirth) needs to be connected to religion in order for Hooke to be able to discuss it. Addressing women first, and then men, signifies the existence of the family as a unit, and perhaps speaks to the sentiment that although women perform childbirth, maternity is a matter of the entire family.

Religious and medical authorities—Hooke’s two identities—converge here and give him a platform and opportunity to make impactful arguments. The implication of this is two-sided. For one, it demonstrates the direct involvement of the Church in family life. Undoubtedly religion was a part of everyday life and ritual for most people, but the extension of the Church’s

26 Hooke, *The Childbirth*, 12.
27 Ibid., 1.
realm into specific parts of private family life, is significant. The lecture is for young married women only (as opposed to all women, young and old, married or unmarried, with or without children) and thus speaks only to women who are deemed ready to have children by society’s moral standards—surely, this lecture is not for any woman who has a child out of wedlock.\(^{28}\)

Second, in continuation of the influence of the Church on family, it defines the role of women in the home and the Church (which, as we have seen, overlap). It furthers our understanding of how deeply involved in women’s childbearing the Church was; as noted in Steven Ozment’s book *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, Martin Luther himself “urged wives to be continually pregnant” to benefit their own health and happiness.\(^{29}\) Ozment points out that this likely builds on the resurrection of the idea that St. Paul taught: “Women will be saved by the bearing of children in faith, love, and holiness, and with discipline.”\(^{30}\) All of this directly places a woman’s worth and holiness on her ability to bear children and remain pious; conveniently, the two are interrelated, because to be pious, according to Hooke, is reason for God to reward women with children. When laid out, the arguments of Hooke, St. Paul and Luther together form a circle, a sort of positive feedback loop: women act piously and praise God, such women are rewarded with ample fertility and relatively painless childbirth, which in turn gives reason for more piety and praise of God. The loop demonstrates and strengthens the shift from Catholicism’s holy celibacy to Protestantism’s holy motherhood.

\(^{28}\) Of course, it must be pointed out that there are conditions regarding which women should appropriately read this lecture, while all men of “all sortes” are welcome to read and absorb it.

\(^{29}\) Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 100.

\(^{30}\) *Ibid.*
A Directory for Midwives

Nicholas Culpeper’s *Directory for Midwives*, published originally some time before 1658 by George Swintown and James Glen in Edinburgh but later reprinted in 1675 in London, is an exhaustive work covering all topics relating to midwifery, from pregnancy to childbirth to post-natal care. The title and publishing page introduces Culpeper as a student of physics and astrology—curiously lacking any mentioned expertise as a medical practitioner, he identifies himself as an academic regardless. His chapter devoted to nursing children is relatively short, yet nonetheless fascinating because it speaks directly to the argument that the Countess of Lincoln made in her “Nurserie” text, which is highly indicative of other authors having drawn these same arguments in their own texts as Clinton did in hers. Culpeper’s Book IX “Of Nursing Children” opens with an acknowledgement (and an expression of frustration against) the popular arguments of the time:

Oh! what a racket do Authors make about this! What thwarting and contradicting, not of others only, but of themselves? What Reasons do they bring, Why a Woman must needs Nurse her own Child? Some extorted from Divinity, *Sarah Nursed Isaac*, therefore every Woman must nurse her own Child. Why is it not as good an Argument, That because *David* was a King, and a Prophet, therefore every man must be a King, and every King a Prophet?

This is not the only qualm Culpeper has with popular reasons for avoiding wet nursing, and he lists others as being equally insufficient in logic and practicality. He also explains that he studied (“read Authors”), contemplated the idea of disease spread by “ill milk”, and was interested in the topic not only because he had children of his own, but also due to the volumes of nursing infants

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31 In this text, Culpeper does not self-identify as a physician; however, secondary sources and descriptions of some primary sources point out that he indeed was. Culpeper’s *Midwife* was actually reprinted, in part, in a medical text titled “The Surgeons Guide: or Military and Domestic Surgery”; authorship is credited to Felix Würtz, dated 1658 (EEBO). Additionally, Culpeper authored a text about herbal remedies that was published after his death, called *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*.

he apparently saw dying in London at the time. His studies led him to the conclusions he writes in his *Directory for Midwives*, which he then divides into two sections organized by what characteristics he believes a wet nurse should have, and at what age the child should be weaned from breastfeeding. Culpeper does not object to arguments like those of Clinton because they utilize scripture as evidence, but because of their interpretation of that evidence. This is a key distinction. It points to the fact that using the Bible for evidence was not discredited, but that there were different ideas about how it should be interpreted to make a point.

Culpeper establishes his arguments and explanations by criticizing the alternative kind of Biblical interpretation that is used by Clinton. The foundation for his argument is criticism of the ‘Divinity’ argument as shown in the quote above. He points out the potentially-infinite implications of this sort of argument: that if Sarah nursing Isaac means all mothers must be like Sarah, then one could equally assume that because David was a king, so should all men strive to be. He enumerates all other arguments he has come across, and counters them in this way, or by pointing out deficiencies in them. For example, he addresses the argument that “Say they, …if a young Lamb suck a Goat, his wool would be harder than the wool of other sheep, and he himself fiercer,” but then in the same text, “…in half a Page further he saith, No Creature will suck other than their own Dams, Man Excepted.” By pointing out such inconsistencies, Culpeper hopes to discredit other authors and establish himself as a better interpreter, a man of speculation and intelligence. He addresses the debate of nursing one’s child, explaining that “All authors universally describe of what complexion and condition a Nurse ought to be: If every Woman then must Nurse her own Child, any complexion must of necessity serve the turn” That is, there are two arguments present that are inconsistent with one another: one, that every woman should

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33 Culpeper 209.
34 [Ibid.](#), 92.
35 [Ibid.](#), 92.
nurse her own child, and two, that any individual nursing the child should have certain
characteristics. If one has to select a nurse for characteristics and avoid nursing a child with a
woman who does not have such characteristics, then many mothers who do not possess those
characteristics would be deemed unfit or unadvised to nurse their child. This problem that
Culpeper points out is another important basis for why he is writing this text.

Curiously enough, though, the remainder of the chapter on nursing one’s infant is
noticeably devoid of such explicit reasoning behind his assertions. He goes on to enumerate a
large list of characteristics that a woman who nurses a child (presumably, wet nurse or mother;
whoever fills such requirements) need possess, yet offers no explanation for each characteristic.
The characteristics, though they must have been popular enough at the time since Culpeper says
that “all authors universally” discuss these “complexion(s) and condition(s) a Nurse ought to
be”\textsuperscript{36}, are all very specific; for example, “She ought to avoid all salt Meats, Garlick, Leek,
Onions, and Mustard.”\textsuperscript{37} Culpeper’s lack of explanation for these rules could very well be
indicative of a general consensus on the effects of diet, exercise, body size and shape, air quality,
etc. (all characteristics and circumstances that he lists as influential his \textit{Directory}) have on a
nurse’s milk that could then adversely effect the infant child.

Perhaps there is a more specific explanation, though. Valerie Fildes, in her work \textit{Wet
Nursing: A History from Antiquity to Present} indicates that breastfeeding presented a kind of
new reproduction, due to the belief that certain qualities of the woman breastfeeding (personality
characteristics and diseases alike) would be passed onto the nursing child; this was a kind of
reproduction that men were unable to participate in.\textsuperscript{38} With this theory in consideration, men like
Culpeper, sought to ensure some form of control over the development of children by dictating

\textsuperscript{36} Culpeper 92.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Valerie Fildes, \textit{Wet Nursing}, 68.
who should and should not be allowed to pass on their characteristics to a nursing infant, and what factors (like diet) they should alter to ensure the future wellbeing of that infant. In keeping with the notion of the Protestant family as a unit, an exertion of patriarchal dominance seems only a natural outcome.

However, the larger part of Culpeper’s writing points to subtle use of religion as a point of argumentative strength. Although Culpeper vehemently disagrees with the kind of interpretation used by authors like Clinton in her *Nurserie*, much of the same religious language and phrasing is present in his *Directory*. His use of religious language shows that he does not discredit use of the Bible in argument, only that his interpretation is different, and his specific interpretation grants him the authority to write this text. He explains that “the Grace of God laies hold upon whomsoever he pleaseth, and therefore I cannot give any universal Rules.”

Further use of this language is seen in small phrases, almost easy to miss; he describes how feeding children unnatural foods in their infancy “make[s] a Devil of a Saint”; that when women nurse their children for too long, “God many times punisheth them”; that he once knew of a woman whose husband threatened to kill her if she failed to birth him a boy, and that “to answer her Distempers (I cannot say, her Prayers) God gave her a Boy.” As an academic, Culpeper is surely familiar with the Bible but is not an authority figure in the Church; however, he still directly interprets the actions and wills of God as they relate to his subject. Again, this action emphasizes the Reformation idea that individuals have the ability to understand God and the Bible without the medium of a priest or clergyman; that idea in turn reinforces authorship and authority. Culpeper is certainly using the Bible in a manner that is much different than that of Clinton or Hooke. His text is focused much more on the practical, indicated by his careful

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39 Culpeper 95.
address of popular arguments and enumerated, specific rules for nursing. And although the text is not centered on religion as the previous two, we should not expect it to be; Culpeper is not a representative of the church like Hooke. This does not divorce him from involving his text with religious language and ideas—they are simply different ideas that represent an individualistic way of interpreting the Bible that is still in keeping with Protestant ideals. Interpretations of the Bible are not uniform, and his text demonstrates that point.

IV. The Texts, Together

These three texts come together to form a conversation on the subjects of maternity and infancy, a conversation occurring in England but spread across one hundred years’ time. There is a momentum in the longevity of the conversation, though, in that it indicates that the topics discussed were significant and relevant throughout the time span. Clearly, these aspects of a woman’s reproductive life were important; they required meticulous addressing and instructing in order for them to be carried out properly. Women, and even men, needed this information to raise children the right way from the start, and to act out of piety. Concerns about women and their infant children are likely part of a larger pattern of aiming to raise families the “right” way, the moral way. Clinton, Culpeper and Hooke allow us to listen in on a small, yet lively and informative part of what was being said about childbearing and nursing in Reformation England.

So much of the discussion on women and their infants is saturated in issues of power and authority. Donna C. Woodford’s essay, Nursing and Influence in Pandosto and The Winter’s Tale, remarks, “early modern authors whose writings address the upbringing of children are also addressing issues of power: who will determine the character of this child, the future character of
this child, the future character of this family, or the future character of this nation?"\textsuperscript{41} Because childbirth and nursing are distinctly female actions, which cannot be carried out by men, they represent aspects of female agency granted by maternal identity, aspects that “endowed the nursing mother or wet-nurse with tremendous power over the shaping of the child” (especially due to the popular belief that children inherited personality characteristics from those who nursed them).\textsuperscript{42} Woodford sees this as a probable anxiety felt by men: discomfort that women are empowered by certain aspects of their maternity, and that they in turn can make choices about it that directly effect the life of the child, who may grow up to be an heir or important figure—especially because the women who were able to make choices about wet nurses or breastfeeding were mostly members of the upper class, with ample money.

In Culpeper and Hooke’s writings, we see these issues of authority discussed in convergence with religious and intellectual authority. Culpeper, concerned with logic but also appreciative of the ultimate authority of a higher power’s actions, seeks to establish himself as one source of human authority, placing himself in a hierarchy by which he is able to instruct and influence a woman in her maternal actions. Hooke is also establishing hierarchy and order, albeit in a different manner: instead of implying that he is a direct authority on childbirth and childrearing itself, he defers authority on those matters to God, still leaving himself as an authority due to his ability to interpret and spread the word of God as a minister. Culpeper and Hooke are thus both using religion and argument in a way that grants them power, and inserts them into a hierarchy in which it would be appropriate and necessary to give wisdom and instruction to maternal females.


\textsuperscript{42} Woodford, “Nursing and Influence,” in \textit{Performing Maternity in Early Modern England}, 183.
Religion gives these men a platform to speak from, but the Countess Elizabeth Clinton seeks this platform as well. Through religion, she is able to find it, although the way she uses it is unique. While Culpeper and Hooke appear to be reacting from a place of anxiety over female agency, Clinton uses this female agency to construct and strengthen her own argument and opinions. Religion, especially under Protestant values regarding the ability to and importance in reading the Bible for oneself, provides Clinton with the power to make her assertions and support them. She is just as concerned with practicing morality through maternal actions, as Culpeper and Hooke are as well; and although one might see her prescriptive and unyielding views as dogmatic and controlling, her *Nurserie* text really speaks to an idea of liberation—not because she (as a woman, and not a man) is instructing women to choose what they do with their own children, but because in using religion, she is allowed as a mother and a Christian to speak her mind and publish this text. In this way, women can discuss topics that are unique to them as females to them because they are freed to interpret and discuss religion in the Protestant fashion. So really, the power of religion can be used to liberate or to restrict; it depends on who is speaking, and why.

**V. Conclusion**

Even in a focused study of three such texts, there arises a multitude of layers to unpack: layers relating to gender, identity, class, and religion. Where they intersect, and what they all have in common, is power and authority—but still these concepts differ in their effect on each layer. Religious authority may be employed to overcome a lack of power due to gender, or identity may be used in tandem with religion to establish authority. The combinations are conceivably endless, but are highly personalized to identity and situation. To offer a complex,
situation answer to a complex problem is, at times, frustratingly unsatisfying. But unpacking identities and identifying the complications or barriers associated with them leads to a more intersectional approach that grants importance to even the small details, details in danger of being overlooked when constructing sweeping narratives.

A focus on interpersonal family life pushes against and complicates traditional views of the Reformation. It is not enough to maintain an abstract idea of the Reformation that overturned institutions and replaced them with new ones, elevating or dismissing powerful individuals along the way. In keeping with new (post-1980) social historiography pioneered by the likes of historian Christopher Haigh that challenges traditional views of the Reformation, a social lens furthers this agenda and grants perspective to how certain aspects of religious reform changed rules and allowed individuals to seize authority in new ways. It demonstrates a new emphasis on family, beginning with the abandonment of Catholic celibacy ideals and resulting in new pressures on maternity and the family, and their interactions with questions of morality and agency. In some ways, adopting Reformation ideals of self-determining the Bible could be used by women to grasp authority, granting a degree of liberation to women. However, in this instance, any such use is not so liberating in that it uses female power to dictate rules and regulations to other women. Or, in the case of Culpeper and Hooke, it is simply another way to grasp the power to dictate on the subject. Where those subjects overlap is in their discussion of rules by which to raise or feed one’s infant, and their use of the Bible to influence their argument. Establishment of authority becomes interwoven with personal identity and personal interpretation of the Bible.

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43 Refer back to footnote five for additional historiography.
However, clearly the issues that arise when examining texts that address aspects of women’s maternal lives are not just religious. In seeking to answer questions about the effects of this new religion on women and family life, it becomes evident that there was an obsession with correcting and directing maternity. Women and men alike were concerned with actions they saw as raising an infant in either a correct or incorrect manner. Religion was one means, probably of many, by which writers grasped the authority to direct, intimidate, or influence their maternal readers into action.

Although on a timeline we are centuries ahead of Culpeper, Clinton and Hooke, in many ways their speeches and arguments feel familiar to us. There is a certain aspect of criticism, opinion, and perhaps even judgment that mothers of today still face. Such criticism is still very much a part of our society that pressure-cooks women into perfection, as they strive to do the very best for themselves and, when applicable, their children. As suggested by historical scholars Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn Read, maternity is a performance. The rest of us are watching, interpreting, and critiquing on the sidelines.

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44 Moncrief and McPherson, *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*. 
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