

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities

Edited by Nancy F. Cott

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HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities

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Edited with an Introduction by

Nancy F. Cott
Yale University

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Series Preface

In the space of one generation, women's history has become the fastest-growing area of scholarship in U.S. history. Since the resurgence of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, insistent questions about the historical meanings of "woman's place" have sowed and reaped a garden of scholarship. Where scholarly works used to be bare of mention of women, academic enterprise has now produced a vigorous growth of books and articles, bringing to light diverse women of every region, race, class and age. This research is marked by a renovating intent that refuses to accept as "human" history a history of men. Interest is lively and debate is stimulating and sought after: attendance at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women rivals the size of the annual convention of the American Historical Association.

While books in women's history are daily increasing in numbers and strength, as in any fast-developing field the scholarly literature in the form of articles is most expansive and up-to-the-minute. All the history journals now publish articles on women's work, domestic settings, family relations, household matters, female politics and organizations and so forth, and new journals have sprung into being to concentrate on such topics. Women's historians publish in numerous regional and thematic history journals as well as in feminist outlets and in journals of other social science disciplines. This series brings together a collection of outstanding articles from the field, almost all written in the past twenty years and more than half published during the 1980s. It brings together, in volumes organized by topic, essays otherwise widely dispersed. These volumes reprint only articles that originally appeared in journals, not chapters of books; review articles are not included. Articles have been chosen for overall quality and for range. Each one was chosen for one or more of the following reasons: because it is the standard authority on its subject matter; represents an important statement on a topic by a recognized scholar; presages an important book to come; provides a first look at new evidence or new methods; or opens an untapped area or new controversy. Older articles have been reprinted if their data or interpretation have not been surpassed or if they marked an important stage in the historiography, even if since superseded.

The historical coverage of the series extends from the Revolutionary era to the 1960s. The articles themselves are dated from the 1940s through 1988. Volumes are organized by topic rather than time period. Within each volume, the

articles are ordered chronologically (with respect to substance), so that the whole can be read as an historical overview. The only exception to this ordering principle is volume 1, on Theory and Method, in which the contents are arranged in order of publication. Within each volume there is an attempt to include articles on as diverse kinds of women as possible. None of the volume topics is regionally or racially defined; rather, all volumes are topically designed so as to afford views of women's work, family lives, and public activities which cut across races and regions. Any volume in the series stands on its own, supplying as full a treatment of a designated subject matter as the scholarly literature will provide. Several groupings of volumes also make sense; that is, volumes 2 through 5 all center around domestic and family matters; volumes 5 through 9 consider other varieties of women's work; volumes 9 through 11 concern uses and abuses of women's bodies; volumes 12 through 14 look at major aspects of socialization; and volumes 15 through 20 include organizational and political efforts of many sorts.

As a whole, the series displays in all its range the vitality of the field of women's history. Aside from imbuing U.S. history with new vision, scholarship in this area has informed, and should continue to inform, current public debate on issues from parental leave to the nuclear freeze. By bringing historical articles together under topical headings, these volumes both represent accurately the shape of historical controversy (or consensus) on given issues and make historians' findings most conveniently available for current reference.

Introduction

Since Barbara Welter found and described, in 1966, a "cult of true womanhood" in popular prescriptive literature of the early nineteenth-century United States, probably the most-sounded theme in women's history has concerned the definition of "true womanhood," and its accompanying ideal of "domesticity." The conflict between ideology and actuality in women's domestic lives, the differing relations of women of different classes and statuses to the ideal of domesticity, and regional and ethnic adaptations or rejections of "true womanhood" have been the subject of historians' inquiries in the last two decades. The articles in this volume develop these themes, treating not only the dominant ideology which linked respectable femininity to domestic occupations but also exploring the content of domestic labor and domestic production, for both the mistress and the female servant of a household.

To all appearances the mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of a peculiarly American religion whose goddess was the wife and mother at her household hearth. In ladies' magazines, novels, sermons, and manuals on marriage and childrearing--even in newspaper chatter--a stereotype of feminine goodness, mercy, and service through domestic ministrations was widely proposed to the reading public. Although significant eighteenth-century writers in England and Europe had proposed models of decorous and appropriate womanhood--Rousseau's Sophie, in his book of education, *Emile*, was only one of the famous--in the nineteenth century the ideology of female domesticity was much more wide-ranging and influential. Transportation and communication advances as well as population migration westward meant that an ideal propagated in eastern cities carried its influence to rural towns and pioneer settlements.

The domestic ideal of womanhood had such wide effect because it concerned not only feminine characteristics but also the nature and functions of family life. It promised that the virtuous wife and mother, by behaving appropriately in her "domestic sphere," by securing harmony in the home, by providing for her husband's comfort and her children's morality and good character, could assure social order. Under woman's reigning presence, the domestic realm appeared to be the source of personal virtue and social adjustment, the preserve of Christian morality. Less and less the engine of economic production or community formation outside, the home was more

assiduously celebrated for emotional and moral accomplishments centering on the family members within. For many women--including opinion-makers such as Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of the magazine *Godey's Ladies Book*, or Catharine Beecher, author of *The American Woman's Home* and other popular treatises--this restructured understanding of the family supplied a positive concept of womanhood and a means of elaborating the responsibilities to society that women could and should carry out without departing from (indeed by fully understanding) "woman's sphere." In their view, the most important contribution women could possibly make to society--a contribution essential and irreplaceable--lay in Christian nurture of their husbands and children.

The garment of true womanhood and domesticity covered the shape of woman's work as much as woman's character. Despite the way that the ideology of domesticity made women's operations in the home a matter of presence, love, and being, the work involved in a nineteenth-century household was continuous and demanding. Contrasting men's sphere of "work" to women's sphere of "home," the ideology glossed over how much work was done at home. True, urban households never saw the growing of foodstuffs (except small kitchen gardens), or butchering or dairying, and soap, candles, rugs and the material for clothing were no longer made at home. But women's work even in the urban household still included sewing, knitting and mending most of the family's clothing, all the cleaning tasks (including the arduous family wash), and provision of three meals a day. And--perhaps more important--the majority of households in the U.S. were not urban until after 1920. Although the preeminent public media speaking of woman's place emanated from cities, most women lived on frontiers, farms or rural towns, where growing food, milking cows, collecting eggs, and bringing water and firewood into the house were parts of daily tasks. Indoor running water was not a regular feature of the nineteenth-century household until the latter part of the century, and even then, only for the more prosperous. Cooking on a woodburning or coal stove was hardly less time-consuming, though perhaps somewhat less dangerous, than cooking on an open hearth. At the same time the growing commercial and industrial prosperity of the urban parts of the U.S. dictated higher standards of consumption and display, so that meals became more varied and elaborate, and items of household decoration more numerous, requiring more maintenance, among those who could afford them.

In prosperous households, the lady of the house did not do all the domestic work requisite to sustaining gentility: her servant or servants did, under her watchful supervision. Throughout the nineteenth century domestic service remained the single largest occupational category for women: in the latter part of the century, when the possibility of factory employment enlarged, still half of all employed women were domestic servants. The work necessary to households--

cleaning, cooking, mending--was so far identified with women that a nineteenth-century person had only to say a girl or woman was wanted to make it clear what kind of job was being offered.¹ By the same token, immigrants to America--if female--were assumed to be suitable to be hired into domestic service, although in practice the differences in outlook between them and their female employers occasioned much conflict between them. For generations of female immigrants, domestic service acted as a form of forced socialization into American ways of life. As soon as other employment opportunities presented themselves, girls and women in the labor force put domestic service at the bottom of their lists of choice. By the twentieth century, white women were much more likely to be found in factory and clerical work than domestic service but black women, rural migrants or urban residents, were still kept out of alternatives to laundry and domestic work by employers' and workers' prejudice. As these articles show, the investigation of women's work in the household is as much a look at employer-employee relations between mistress and maid as it is a study of some family members serving others, and as much a study of work for wages as it is of unpaid work.

Notes

1. See Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

Domestic Ideology and Domestic Work

AMERICAN FEMININE IDEALS IN TRANSITION: THE RISE OF THE MORAL MOTHER, 1785-1815

RUTH H. BLOCH

Motherhood has long held a special place of honor in the symbolism of American life. Still a dominant value today, the ideal of motherhood probably achieved its quintessential expression in the writings of the mid-nineteenth century. Women, according to the prevailing Victorian image, were supremely virtuous, pious, tender, and understanding. Although women were also idealized as virgins, wives, and Christians, it was above all as mothers that women were attributed social influence as the chief transmitters of religious and moral values. Indeed, other respectable female roles—wife, charity worker, teacher, sentimental writer—were in large part culturally defined as extensions of motherhood, all similarly regarded as nurturant, empathic, and morally directive.¹

The Victorian maternal ideal was first manifest as part of the culture of the most articulate, Anglo-American, Protestant, middle and upper classes. Some of its features, particularly its asexuality, probably never permeated as deeply into the culture of other American groups. However, the high evaluation of maternal influence was destined in time to command a far wider allegiance. By the mid-twentieth century, it would be difficult to identify a more pervasive “all-American” ideal.

Even among the social groups who gained cultural dominance in the Victorian era, however, motherhood had not always been a dominant feminine ideal. Indeed, in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century literature written and read in America, motherhood was singularly unidealized, usually disregarded as a subject, and even at times actually denigrated. Partially because pre-Victorian writers understated the importance of motherhood, historians of the colonial period have also given the subject far less attention than more overtly economic forms of female labor, women’s legal status, and the more common literary depiction of women as wives and Christians. Moreover, the widely acknowledged “transitional” phase between mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century

attitudes toward motherhood has received surprisingly little examination. Recently, the valuable work of Linda Kerber and Nancy Cott has begun to fill this scholarly gap, but primarily because they focus on other, broader issues—Kerber on views of women in late eighteenth-century republican ideology and Cott on a wide constellation of changes in New England women's lives between 1780 and 1835—neither author has given extended attention to changing conceptions of motherhood *per se*. In particular, no one has yet analyzed the wide range of printed literature circulating in America between the late seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries, much of it British in origin, that bore on the question of mothering. The relationship between this literature and the consciousness (much less behavior) of even its limited readership is, of course, highly problematic; and many unanswered questions about mothering in this period remain. Yet even when viewed narrowly as the "official" culture of dominant groups, this body of literature reveals a change in attitudes of great and continuing significance to the history of American women.²

* * * * *

Prior to the late eighteenth century, two, essentially mutually exclusive, ideal images of women appeared in the literature written and read in America. The first, that of woman as "help-meet," has been the most extensively described by modern historians.³ It was the earliest and most indigenously American literary ideal, associated above all with New England Puritanism and, later, with significant modifications, with a part of the American Enlightenment. In its Puritan version, the help-meet ideal laid great stress on the value of female subordination to men, a position justified both by Old Testament patriarchal models and by general cultural assumptions that women were weaker in reason; more prone to uncontrolled emotional extremes; and in need, therefore, of practical, moral, and intellectual guidance from men. Yet while thus proclaiming female mental inferiority and insisting on the wife's duty to obey her husband (except when he violated divine law), Puritan literature tended to downplay qualitative differences between the sexes and to uphold similar ideal standards for both men and women. Faith, virtue, wisdom, sobriety, industry, mutual love and fidelity in marriage, and joint obligations to children were typically enjoined on both sexes. Good wives, who were above all defined as pious, frugal, and hardworking, were especially valued for the help they could be to men in furthering both spiritual and worldly concerns.

Some eighteenth-century Enlightenment writings on women published in America also minimized differences between the sexes

and emphasized the usefulness of sensible, industrious wives. These writings, however, often revised the earlier help-meet ideal by simultaneously stressing female rational capabilities, advocating more serious education for women, and urging greater equality in marriage. In their defense of women, these authors, even more than the Puritans, tended to place special emphasis on the practical value of diligent housewives.⁴

The second feminine ideal that appeared in the eighteenth-century literature emphasized ornamental refinement.⁵ Whereas the help-meet ideal tended to downplay sexual distinctions and to stress the utility of good housewives, this more upper-class ideal instead concentrated on feminine graces and dwelt on the charms of female social companionship in polite company. It came to America primarily by means of imported English literature, especially sentimental romances, and didactic pieces on female education and etiquette, many of which were popular enough to be reprinted in America. Eighteenth-century periodicals, largely extracted from contemporary English magazines, were also full of articles conveying an ornamental image of women. According to this vision, often described in highly ornate eighteenth-century prose and verse, women were exquisite beings—beautiful, delicate, pure, and refined. Although modesty and piety constituted key features of this ideal, as they did of the help-meet image, charm and fashionable female “accomplishments” such as musical performance, drawing, and speaking French tended to be incorporated as well. Originally associated with the chivalric tradition of romantic love, this image of ornamental refinement still retained aristocratic overtones and probably strongly appealed to those elements of the eighteenth-century English and American prosperous middle-classes aspiring to gentility.

* * * * *

Both of these eighteenth-century feminine ideals, the help-meet and the ornament, dwelt primarily on woman’s relationships to God and man as Christian, wife, and social companion. Neither placed much emphasis on motherhood. In practically all of the literature on women circulating in America prior to the late eighteenth century, the theme of motherhood tended either to be ignored altogether in favor of such topics as courtship or marriage, or it was subsumed among a variety of other religious and domestic obligations shared with men. This is not to say that women, in reality, had no special maternal relationships to their children; women not only gave birth, they usually nursed and tended small children far more than men. Yet despite this actual behavior, motherhood received less normative emphasis and symbolic

appreciation in early American literature than did many other aspects of women's lives.

Throughout most of the colonial period, relationships between mothers and infants rarely drew literary attention. Although we know that mothers generally took care of their babies, their behavior for the most part evidently remained ascriptively controlled, dictated by custom passed down from one generation to the next without any felt need for written scrutiny. Inasmuch as mothering became a matter for literary treatment at all, it was far from idealized. Puritan writers whose works circulated in New England did occasionally turn to the subject, but the main maternal functions that aroused their commentary were regarded as biological givens: childbearing and breastfeeding.

Childbirth, God's special curse on the daughters of Eve, received notice from Puritan writers because, above all, it raised the specter of death. In an age when women often died in delivery, and infants frequently thereafter, ministers viewed pregnancy primarily as an occasion to exhort women to guard their health and, more importantly, to seek their spiritual salvation.⁶ Partly in response to this high risk of mortality, fertile women who successfully bore many children also drew some special recognition.⁷

The only other aspect of mothers' relationships with infants to receive much attention in early American literature was breastfeeding. Ministers addressed this issue specifically in order to urge mothers to nurse their own children. During this period, it was still customary for many urban and landed families throughout western Europe to send babies to suckle wet nurses, and, although the evidence on colonial America is sketchy, in the eighteenth century, wet-nursing seems to have made a few inroads on this side of the Atlantic as well.⁸ The Puritan clergy strenuously objected to this practice, insisting that mothers who chose not to nurse their babies opposed the clear will of God as revealed in both Scripture and nature. Ministers commonly cited Biblical examples of mothers suckling babies and also pointed out that God obviously designed the breasts on the female body for this use. To defy this divine intention constituted a basic violation of a mother's calling, a clear-cut sign of sinful sloth, vanity, and selfishness. On occasion this religious case against wet-nursing joined with a medical one, that maternal breastfeeding less often endangered the physical health of the child. Only rarely, and evidently only in imported English treatises, was the impact of wet-nursing upon a child's character raised as a noteworthy consideration. American writers who condemned the practice stressed the importance of the child's health and, especially, the mother's duty to God, not the value of

an affective relationship between mother and child.⁹

This absence of literary emphasis on emotional bonds between mothers and children is no indication, of course, that such attachments did not actually exist. Even the act of sending a child out to a wet nurse is not evidence that a mother was indifferent to her baby's health and happiness.¹⁰ Indeed, although maternal love was seldom a theme in early American literature, it seems to have been largely taken for granted. Several Puritan ministers issued warnings against "a Mother's excessive fondness," the tendency for mothers to spoil or "cocker," their children, "to as it were smother their Children in their Embraces."¹¹ The observation that mothers were particularly tender toward their children, however, more often gave rise to criticism than commendation. Cotton Mather's printed funeral sermon for his own mother, which gave almost sentimental homage to maternal comfort, was a rare departure from this tendency to devalue what seemed distinctive about a mother's love. Yet even there, in characteristically Puritan fashion, the overriding theme of Mather's sermon was that God is still a "better comforter." "What," he asked, "is the best of *Mothers* weigh'd in the Ballance with such a *Father*?"¹²

In keeping with this highly patriarchal Puritan God, early American literature on childrearing gave as much or more notice and appreciation to fathers as to mothers. Compared with the paucity of written material on infancy, there was a great deal to be read about childhood education after the nursing stage. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children were attracting increased attention as objects of artistic, literary, religious, and pedagogical concern throughout the western world.¹³ In New England, where Puritans took an especially vital interest in socialization that would maximize chances of religious conversion, sermons and treatises on family life meticulously enumerated parental responsibilities. Practically all these works assumed that parental obligation was either vested primarily in fathers or shared by both parents without sexual distinction.

Puritan writings on the family generally divided into separate sections that defined ideal relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, and master and servant, specifying the mutual obligations of each figure within the complementary pairs. The main tasks encumbant upon the parent, in addition to insuring the child's physical well-being, were to provide baptism, prayer, religious instruction, and assistance in the choice of a calling and a spouse. Because "parent" was itself a genderless term, these works often conveyed the impression that mothers and fathers

ideally performed much the same role.¹⁴ Indeed, those few works that dealt separately with specifically maternal responsibilities—usually as one small part of sermons on virtuous women—reiterated many of the same duties that other works on childrearing commonly assigned to fathers as well. Good mothers were described as caring, pious, and wise; they prayed for their children, instructed and catechised them, reproved their sins; and they served as examples of virtue and faith.¹⁵ None of these were distinctively maternal obligations. At the most, writers would point out that because mothers had closer contact with small children, they had special opportunities to make lasting impressions on young minds.¹⁶ At times, however, commentators actually denigrated the value of this early maternal influence, insisting that fathers subsequently undertook the more serious and ultimately most beneficial education of their children. As Cotton Mather once expounded upon the proverb “A wise son maketh a glad father, but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother,” applying it to children of both sexes:

. . . it may be worth while to Enquire, Why ‘tis rather the Gladness of the *Father* than of the *Mother*, that is here mentioned upon the *Wise Child*? Unto this I answer; ‘Tis because the *Father* ordinarily has most *Share* in procuring, and most *Sense* in perceiving, the *Wisdom* of his Children. When Children are come to such *Maturity*, that their Wisdom does become Observable, ordinarily the *Mother* has more dismissed them from her Conversation than the *Father* has from *his*. . . But if you go on to Enquire, Why ‘tis rather the Sadness of the *Mother*, than of the *Father*, that is mentioned upon the Foolish Child? Unto this I answer; ‘Tis because when Children miscarry the *Mother* is ordinarily most *Blamed* for *It*: People will be most ready to say, and very *Often* say it very *Justly* too, ‘Twas her making Fools of them, that betray’d them into the Sinful Folly. . . .¹⁷

Those works that outlined the more neutral “parent’s” obligations were, moreover, often heavily patriarchal in tone, not only employing the pronoun “he,” but also drawing from such Biblical models as Abraham, Joshua, and David.¹⁸ At times, specifically paternal duties such as presiding over family worship received special emphasis. Other works on the upbringing of children were explicitly addressed to fathers alone, while only one book published in America prior to the late eighteenth century, an edition of *The Mother’s Catechism* attributed to the English cleric John Willison, was designed specifically for mothers.¹⁹ Indeed, ministers often felt it necessary to make a special point that mothers were not “exempted” from the duty to participate in the religious education of their children.²⁰ Others noted a tendency among children to

respect their mothers less than their fathers and reminded them of the Fifth Commandment injunction to honor both parents equally. William Gouge, the English Puritan whose treatise on family life was well known in New England, even sympathetically acknowledged that, at least for boys, the duty to honor mothers despite their manifold female deficiencies was "the truest triall of a childes subjection."²¹

This devaluation of motherhood was, on the one hand, an integral part of broader cultural assumptions about the inferiority of women. The traditional view that women were less rational, less capable of controlling emotions than men, helped to explain not only their unfitness for civil and ecclesiastical leadership and their need to be deferential in marriage, but also their subordinate parental status. Certain qualities regarded as essential to good child-rearing, such as self-discipline and theological understanding, were deemed more characteristic of men; and the Protestant Reformation even further accentuated the value of these supposedly masculine traits. Moreover, by abandoning certain Catholic and aristocratic traditions that had enhanced the position of women—such as the worship of Mary and the female saints and the extensive education of at least some privileged women—Puritanism in some ways actually lowered the status of women. At a time when the domestic socialization of children was becoming a matter of greater cultural scrutiny than before throughout the western European world, the paternal role, in particular, drew pronounced emphasis and respect.

On the other hand, despite this elevation of fathers over mothers, the standard against which they were measured was essentially the same. Although mothers had more weaknesses to overcome, as "parents" they were supposed to strive toward an identical ideal. No differentiated maternal role received extended definition. Only childbearing, breastfeeding, and the preliminary education of very small children drew notice as uniquely maternal obligations. Partially because Puritans believed that infants were depraved and that the truly decisive process of conversion only began later on, these early years of predominantly maternal care aroused minimal interest relative to the later period of serious religious instruction that involved fathers as well.

The lack of emphasis on motherhood in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan literature reflected, in addition, certain social realities of family life. Fathers not only wielded superior intellectual and moral authority as men, but they also worked in sufficient proximity to their children to take an active part in childrearing. Craftsmen and tradesmen typically conducted their

businesses at home; even farmers worked close by and often spent long winter months indoors. Furthermore, although the term "parent" referred to mothers and fathers, other adult figures frequently lived with children and undoubtedly shared childrearing obligations, thereby further diffusing the parental role. Colonial households, for example, often included servants, many of them adolescents sent by their parents to learn practical skills from other adults.²² Writings on familial obligations typically advised masters to treat servants as they would their own children; servants, in turn, were enjoined to aid in the religious education of the young.²³ Their involvement in the life of a growing child may well have further undermined the uniqueness of the maternal relationship.

Mothers, moreover, much like fathers and servants, typically engaged in other activities in addition to childrearing. Not only were rudimentary household tasks demanding occupations; but women also had to produce many of their own commodities for domestic use in this preindustrial, and still relatively uncommercial, economy. They often helped their husbands with the craft or trade, and on occasion even owned and managed enterprises inherited from deceased husbands or fathers.²⁴ If parenthood was not regarded as a predominantly maternal responsibility, neither was motherhood the primary occupation of women.

The prevailing image of women as wives, or "help-meets," rather than mothers, then, while partly a result of deprecatory opinions about both women and children, also accurately described major aspects of women's lives. The more fanciful ornamental ideal of female refinement sought, to the contrary, to elevate women above all the banalities of work. Yet even while taking the otherwise nearly opposite perspective on women, this ideal, too, tended to disregard motherhood in preference for other defining characteristics. The rearing of children was evidently considered a far too mundane and undistinguished feature of a woman's married life to warrant idealization from either point of view.

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The second volume of Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* more than any other work first heralded the new, idealized conception of motherhood. Here the new ex-servant girl Pamela settles into her married life with the country squire Mr. B. and takes on the at once serious and pleasurable task of rearing their children. Although the plot actually revolves around other, more suspenseful themes, the novel dwells periodically on Mrs. B.'s maternal virtue: she unsuccessfully pleads with her husband to allow her to breastfeed her baby; she jeopardizes her own health to nurse her son when he contracts smallpox (probably a consequence of using the wet

nurse); she studiously engaged in a detailed examination of Locke's *Thoughts on Education*; and, in the closing scene of the novel, she recounts moral tales to enraptured children clustered about her in the nursery.

One suspects that the popularity of *Pamela* was due far less to this domestic sequel than to the passionate romance of the first volume. Yet this work, which appeared in its first American edition as early as 1744, offered a preliminary sketch of a feminine ideal that by the turn of the century had become widespread—particularly in more explicitly didactic religious, educational, and medical literature. By transforming the virginal chambermaid Pamela into the wise matron Mrs. B., Richardson merged parts of the older ideals of domestic competence and ornamental purity with the new image of the moral mother.

Although anticipated by Richardson, this new maternal ideal gained ascendancy in America only toward the end of the eighteenth century. It emerged in the context of an expanding literature on various aspects of women's lives, including female education, courtship, and marriage. Children, too, always objects of great concern in Puritan literature, received ever more specialized and detailed attention over the course of the eighteenth century.²⁵ The difference between these post-Revolutionary commentaries and earlier publications on women and children was not, however, merely a difference in number but a difference in kind. To be sure, in the literature on women the older help-meet and ornamental ideals were still much in evidence; and in literature on childrearing the genderless "parent" was still an object of address. However, an altered conception of motherhood developed alongside these traditional views. Between 1785 and 1815, large numbers of reprinted British and indigenously American works began to appear that stressed the unique value of the maternal role. Not only did the still popular *Pamela* articulate this new theme, but so did many contemporary books and magazines published in America on such subjects as family religion, children's health and morality, and female manners and education. It was taken up, moreover, by late eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalists and evangelical Protestants both, groups representing broad Anglo-American intellectual orientations that became increasingly polarized near the end of the century. Although they tended to define it somewhat differently, the value of moral motherhood was one of the few things about which many on both sides agreed.

During the late eighteenth century, writers began to dwell on the critical importance of proper maternal care during infancy.

What had earlier been left to custom for the first time became a matter of widespread written analysis and prescriptive advice. Opposition to wet-nursing, for example, although always pronounced in Puritan America, now enlisted the support of many physicians and other secular commentators who advanced the cause of maternal breastfeeding on far more comprehensive grounds. Mothers who chose not to nurse their own children were still regarded as essentially profane and were now often charged with violating Enlightenment natural law as well as the Protestant will of God. The child's health became an even more salient factor in these discussions than it had been earlier. And, in addition to extending these older arguments, late eighteenth-century authors introduced a new set of objections to wet-nursing. They began, for example, to stress the detrimental effects upon the child's character. The strict Calvinist doctrine of infant depravity began giving way to the more environmentalist psychology of the Enlightenment, and many writers came to portray the newborn baby's mind as infinitely impressionable, as "a blank sheet of paper," "spotless as new-fallen snow," capable of being "easily moulded into any Form."²⁶ Earlier European medical theorists had warned that a nurse could convey bad character, or "humour," through the physical medium of milk, an argument that had never caught on in Puritan America.²⁷ Now several writers contended that those who nursed babies wielded determining psychological influence, not so much through the milk itself (although the metaphor was on occasion employed) but, more significantly, through their personal interaction. Wet nurses, they argued, could not be trusted to implant desirable characters because they felt less affection for babies than natural mothers and because they might be mentally or morally deficient. "What prudent mother," asked the Rhode Island minister Enos Hitchcock, "will trust the commencement of the education of her child in the hands of a mercenary nurse . . . who knows little more than how to yield nourishment to an infant [?]"²⁸ Borrowing an expression from Rousseau, a New York midwife named Mary Watkins protested that, in addition, wet-nursing violated "the rights of the mother to see her infant love another woman as well or better than herself."²⁹ Mindful that "even upon the breast infants are susceptible of impressions," authorities encouraged nursing mothers to be "double careful" of their tempers, "to indulge no ideas but what are cheerful, and no sentiments but what are kindly."³⁰ Indeed, several advised that even if a mother proved incapable of breastfeeding, she should never send her baby away from home to nurse. Rather she herself nevertheless should assume primary

control over the physical and emotional care of her child, either by feeding it manually or by keeping a wet nurse on hand under her close supervision.³¹

In another major revision of the case against wet-nursing, writers began to recommend maternal breastfeeding not only as a necessary religious duty, but also as a source of physical and psychological fulfillment for the mother as well as the child. Nursing, as well as infant care generally, came to be viewed as an exquisite pleasure, as an invaluable opportunity to delight in the charms of innocent infancy. Far from requiring physical sacrifice, many authors suggested, breastfeeding actually enhanced the mother's health; nursing mothers became more radiant, contented, graceful, and "harmonious."³² And, contrary to fashionable opinion, men would find these mothers more attractive as well. As the widely read English physician Hugh Smith phrased this often highly sentimental appeal, "a chaste and tender wife, with a little one at her breast is certainly to her husband the most exquisitely enchanting object upon earth."³³

Not only were mothers strongly advised to feed their own children, but for the first time they were also furnished with extensive written information about how to do it. They were instructed how to overcome physical problems such as sore nipples, how to use manual devices like the "pot" and the "boat," how often to feed, when to wean, and so on. Medical experts also addressed mothers on various other aspects of infant care. Handbooks on child nurture and disease began to become widely available during this period. Most of these were American reprints of slightly earlier works by well-known English and Scotch obstetricians, but in the early nineteenth century, indigenous American publications also began to appear. These works urged mothers to tend closely to their small children—not just to nurse them competently when sick, but to clothe them loosely rather than swaddle them, to keep them meticulously clean, to exercise them regularly outdoors, to keep them on a special diet for years, and (some texts said) to feed them on demand rather than on schedule.³⁴

Although we know next to nothing about actual childrearing practices, most of these admonitions seem aimed toward increasing the amount of attention paid by mothers to small children. Infant care came to be viewed as an exacting occupation, one requiring not only heightened concentration, but also special expertise. Tasks that had earlier been regulated by unwritten custom now began to be matters for extended analysis and deliberate, rational manipulation. A few of the British physicians openly deplored the superstitious ignorance of most mothers

and believed themselves to be on a mission of scientific enlightenment.³⁵ This medical condescension could, however, also backfire as mothers themselves came to take pride in their craft. *The Maternal Physician*, for example, a book of advice written by an American mother of eight, spoke more directly from the voice of experience. Acknowledging her debt to the books by the doctors, she adds: "... these gentlemen must pardon me if I think, after all, that a mother is her child's best physician, in all ordinary cases; and that none but a mother can tell how to *nurse* an infant as it ought to be nursed."³⁶

Several of these popular medical handbooks on childcare contained sections offering advice on the psychological as well as the physical management of small children. The dominant message was that mothers should establish gentle but firm moral discipline as early as possible. Just as the impressionability of infant minds became grounds for objecting to wet nurses, so prevailing assumptions about the continuing malleability of small children's characters served to heighten the responsibility assigned to mothers throughout these first formative years. Many writers warned against entrusting children to servants, who were commonly characterized as careless, ignorant, and even potentially corrupt. William Buchan, the author of the manual *Advice to Mothers*, described the far-reaching ramifications of this early maternal moral custody:

Everything great or good in future life, must be the effect of early impressions; and by whom are those impressions to be made but by mothers, who are most interested in the consequences? Their instructions and example will have a lasting influence and of course, will go farther to form the morals, than all the eloquence of the pulpit, the efforts of schoolmasters, or the corrective power of the civil magistrate, who may, indeed, punish crimes, but cannot implant the seeds of virtue.³⁷

Not surprisingly, ministers and secular moralists as well as medical experts often took up this theme, exhorting mothers to use their power to "ingraft," "sow," and "root" steadfast principles of virtue in impressionable young minds.³⁸ "Weighty beyond expression is the charge devolved on the female parent," solemnly observed the New Hampshire minister Jesse Appleton, "It is not within the province of human wisdom to calculate all the happy consequences resulting from the perservering assiduity of mothers."³⁹

As writers thus accorded more significance to maternal care during the first years of life, they in effect upgraded the status of what had always been a female role. For mothers traditionally

had been entrusted with very small children, particularly in America where wet-nursing was relatively rare from the outset. The change in conceptions of motherhood involved, however, not simply a higher evaluation of an age-old occupation but also a substantive redefinition of the maternal role. Many responsibilities that had earlier been assigned to fathers or to parents jointly became transferred to mothers alone. Whereas Puritan writers had portrayed fathers as taking an active, even primary role in childhood education once the children became capable of rational thought and moral discrimination, now fathers began to recede into the background in writings about the domestic education of children.

By the turn of the century, Protestant clergymen frequently stressed the religious influence of mothers without reference to any subsequent paternal intervention at all. Whereas past literature on childhood education had been primarily addressed to fathers, now books and magazines catering to women offered advice on the moral upbringing, discipline, and education of growing children.⁴⁰ Catechisms, instructive dialogues, and moral stories for children began to feature mothers in the instructive role. One anonymous publication entitled *The Mother's Gift*, for example, a work that went into several American editions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, contained both a catechism and several heavily didactic stories about children's lives in which fathers scarcely appear.⁴¹ Mrs. Elizabeth Helme, the English author of another such educational manual for mothers called *Maternal Instruction* reprinted in New York in 1804, introduced her work by explaining, "As I regard an informed mother the most proper and attractive of all teachers, I have chosen that character as the principal, in the following sheets."⁴² A new Quaker catechism similarly cast "mother" as the questioner, as did other, less formal educational dialogues.⁴³ Even the earlier *Mother's Catechism* by John Willison now enjoyed an impressive revival.⁴⁴ Nor were all of these works aimed solely at the religious and moral education of children. Practical information on the use of tools and money; basic skills such as reading and arithmetic; and even more advanced subjects such as history, biography, geography, science, and art all fell within the range of what at least some authors regarded as the mother's appropriate educational role.⁴⁵ Although this early maternal instruction scarcely substituted for the more formal education that children, especially boys, would receive later on, professional teachers were evidently to take up where mothers left off. "Business, and many cares, call the father abroad," explained a New Hampshire clergyman, "but

home is the mother's province—here she reigns sole mistress the greatest part of her life.”⁴⁶ Fathers, concurred an English author widely read in America, “can afford but little leisure to superintend the education of their children.”⁴⁷ Indeed, just as a few Puritan commentators had seen fit to remind mothers that they, too, bore some responsibilities for childhood education, now an occasional work made the reverse point that fathers should not simply leave the rearing of children entirely to mothers alone.⁴⁸

The literature that entrusted mothers with such wide-ranging physical, psychological, religious, and intellectual custody over the young in part accurately reflected concrete social changes that greatly expanded and specialized the maternal role. These structural changes occurred first and far more rapidly in England, still the source of much that was read in America even after the Revolution, but the indigenous as well as the imported literature also spoke to a long-range social process beginning in America. A real, although very gradual, realignment in the familial division of labor loosely coincided with this cultural redefinition of motherhood; and it occurred first among the same literate, commercial middle-class groups that provided the largest literary market. Whereas earlier mothers had often shared parental responsibilities with servants and fathers, by the late eighteenth century, these other figures had begun to withdraw from the domestic scene. Fewer middle-class households contained servants than they had earlier. Those who did become servants in the late eighteenth century, moreover, now usually came from much lower social and cultural backgrounds than their employers, a difference which undoubtedly contributed to the frequency of later warnings against their influence on children.⁴⁹ The structural change that altered parental roles the most, however, was the gradual physical removal of the father's place of work from the home, a process already under way in eighteenth-century America among tradesmen, craftsmen, manufacturers, and professionals (if not the majority of farmers), and one that in England was rapidly accelerating with the beginnings of industrialization. Fathers and their assistants who worked outside the domestic premises no longer had continuous contact with children. In the absence of these other parental figures, childrearing responsibilities slowly became less diffused, more exclusively focused on mothers.⁵⁰

Not only did mothers rear children more by themselves, but simultaneously—and for similar reasons—women became more exclusively preoccupied with their maternal roles. Although literature at the turn of the century still stressed the value of wives who were frugal “economisers,” women were becoming less vitally

engaged in economic production. Those whose husbands worked away from home could less directly assist their labor. And although the textile industry continued to provide work for some, usually unmarried, women in their homes, the decline of the domestic system of production was already under way in both England and America by the early nineteenth century.⁵¹ Home manufacturing for domestic use, while still a major activity of most women, was becoming a less demanding job in settled regions as more goods became available at affordable prices on the expanding commercial market. As women were relieved of much of their former economic role and at the same time left in primary care of children, motherhood understandably came to be a more salient feature of adult female life. Still another interrelated development, also associated with increased material comfort as well as some expansion of literacy, was the growth of a female, middle-class reading public in England and America.⁵² These more leisured women provided a ready market for authors, many of whom themselves were women, who spoke to their special concerns as mothers.

As women came to be seen as the primary childrearsers, motherhood often came to be viewed as a powerful vehicle through which women wielded broad social influence. Physicians and other writers delivering advice on childcare often pointed to the socially beneficial effects of good mothering, some even holding out the possibility of a wholesale "revolution" in human manners and morals.⁵³ As both Nancy Cott and Ann Douglas have recently observed, New England ministers who spoke to an increasingly female constituency in this period were especially taken with this vision of maternal moral influence permeating throughout society.⁵⁴ "Mothers do, in a sense, hold the reins of government and sway the ensigns of national prosperity and glory," the Reverend William Lyman typically glorified the role, "yea, they give direction to the moral sentiments of our rising hopes, and contribute to form their moral state."⁵⁵ This was, of course, a particularly compelling argument to those seeking to justify the restriction of women to the ever-narrowing domestic sphere. Characterizing the important responsibilities of motherhood, the minister Thomas Barnard, for example, took a direct swipe at Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. "These are not the fancied, but the real 'Rights of Women.' They give them an extensive power over the fortunes of man in every generation."⁵⁶ Yet such argumentation, far from being confined to antifeminists, carried weight even with Wollstonecraft herself who, while insisting that women were capable of other achievements as well, also stressed that "the rearing of children—that is,

the laying a [sic] foundation of sound health both of body and mind in the rising generation . . . [is] the peculiar destination of women."⁵⁷

As motherhood was deemed a more demanding responsibility than it had been earlier, the complementary view arose that women, in particular, were eminently suited to rear children. Not only were they endowed with the physiology to bear and nurse babies, but, an increasing number of writers suggested, they also possessed the requisite mental qualities to take charge of the minds and morals of growing children. Challenging the traditionally vaunted moral, and often even intellectual, superiority of men, authors increasingly celebrated examples of female piety, learning, courage, and benevolence.⁵⁸ Women often came to be depicted not only as virtuous in themselves, but as more virtuous than men, indeed, as the main "conservators of morals" in society by means of their beneficial influence on both men and children.⁵⁹ Even New England clergymen regarded "the superior sensibility of females," their "better qualities" of tenderness, compassion, patience, and fortitude as inclining them more naturally toward Christianity than men.⁶⁰ In part, this exaltation of female piety came as an appreciative response to the ministers' increasingly female congregations, but it also reflected broad intellectual changes extending far beyond the New England churches. For during this period the qualities traditionally associated with women, particularly emotionalism, came to be more highly valued throughout Anglo-American culture. Not only religion, which became more revivalistic and softer in doctrine, but sentimental and romantic literature as well as other, less popular artistic and intellectual movements all registered this shift. No longer grounds for disparagement, the supposedly natural susceptibility of women to "the heart" now became viewed as the foundation of their superior virtue.

In accord with this newly elevated characterization of female emotions, maternal fondness and tenderness toward children—behavior that had often provoked criticism from Puritan writers—now received highly sentimental acclaim. In *Pamela*, for example, when Richardson describes Mrs. B. disagreeing with a few points in Locke's *Thoughts on Education*, her objections arise from her own more gentle and indulgent approach to children. Around the turn of the century many authors presented tenderness as the primary component of good mothering, indeed, as the very quality most essential to the cultivation of morality in children.⁶¹ In sentimental poetry carried by magazines—flowery verses bearing such titles as "A Mother's Address to a Dying Infant," "Sweet