

“Mastomania”

Breastfeeding and the Circulation of Desire in Nineteenth-Century France

The concept of sexual pleasure while breastfeeding, still faintly scandalous in the twenty-first century, circulates in a variety of nineteenth-century French texts, from medical discourse to the fictional works of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. Although some medical authorities condemned sensual breastfeeding, or “mastomania,” as a vice, others used the promise of sexual pleasure to entice recalcitrant mothers to breastfeed. In representations of maternal breastfeeding found in both literary and medical texts, it is often the male gaze that constructs meaning. The reciprocal desire of mother and infant shifts to include a third person, the narrator-spectator, whose own desire for the breast creates a fantasy of maternal erotic response that is then condemned as a vice. This confusion of subject and object of desire raises complex questions about the motivations of the male authors of these texts. This article uses psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Klein, and Kristeva to argue that the erotic dimension of the breastfeeding couple is tolerated, and even celebrated, in nineteenth-century literature but only if the male gaze constructs and controls the mother’s desire.

In 1898, Dr. Gustave Joseph Witkowski described a peculiar phenomenon: “Certain lactating women, hysterics for example, experiencing a special enjoyment in the titillations of the nipple, prolong breast-feeding to the extreme. Dr. Jose de Letamendi noted this vice ... and gave it the name of *mastomania* or *sensual breast-feeding*” (Witkowski 67; my emphasis).¹ The concept of sexual pleasure while breastfeeding, still faintly scandalous in the twenty-first century, circulates in a variety of nineteenth-century French cultural productions, from medical discourse to the fictional works of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. In such representations, it is often the male gaze that constructs meaning by either reaffirming the pleasures of nursing for the sake of the (usually male) infant

or revealing a desire to take the place of the child. One example can be seen in Flaubert’s early autobiographical work, *Memoirs of a Crazy Man (Mémoires d’un fou)*: “The singular ecstasy I felt upon seeing that breast; how I devoured it with my eyes, how I would have wished to merely touch that bosom!” (37). The reciprocal desire of mother and infant shifts to include a third party, the male spectator, whose own desire for the breast creates a fantasy of maternal erotic response to the nursling. This confusion of subject and object of desire raises complex questions about the motivations of the male authors of these texts. In this article, I will argue that the erotic dimension of the breastfeeding mother is tolerated, and even celebrated, in nineteenth-century French literature but only when the male gaze constructs and controls the mother’s desire.

Although it may seem oddly modern in the twenty-first century, the idea of sensual breastfeeding was far from new in the nineteenth century; prior to the Enlightenment, medical authorities in France such as Laurent Joubert and Ambroise Paré saw sexual stimulation while breastfeeding as nature’s way of enticing women to nurse. In their view, wealthy mothers who hired a wet nurse were overlooking a source of potential pleasure. Joubert wrote in 1578 that “if they [mothers] knew what pleasure there is in nursing children, which wet-nurses enjoy, they would praise them for nursing other people’s children, rather than abandoning their own” (418). According to Valerie Lastinger, this matter-of-fact acceptance of maternal arousal became more problematic when the Enlightenment’s definition of motherhood carefully segregated the maternal and the sexual: “the sexual element of the nursing couple’s bonding was not one that the encyclopedists discussed, or even mentioned, and it soon became taboo” (611).

One of the consequences of this separation of the maternal and the sexual, as philosopher Iris Marion Young has noted, is that it increased woman’s dependence on man for sexual gratification. As Young explains, “If motherhood is sexual, the mother and child can be a circuit of pleasure for the mother, then the man may lose her allegiance and attachment ... she may find him dispensable” (198-199). Seen in this light, segregating mothers from the possibility of sexual pleasure in the mother-child relationship is a strategy for controlling female sexuality.

In his treatise on education, *Emile*, published in 1762, Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes maternal breastfeeding as the “sweet task imposed on [mothers] by nature” (14). In Rousseau’s worldview, the act of nursing one’s child becomes a duty rather than a pleasure, and he notes the benefits to the nursing mother, mostly in terms of the moral and social advantages. In fact, he warns that the “violence of the passions” could spoil a woman’s milk (24). Rousseau includes a vague reference to the “pleasures associated by nature with maternal duties” (26) but gives no indication as to

what those pleasures might be. For him, mothers should nurse their children to reform society and improve morals, not for their own selfish gain.

By 1802, the subject of maternal pleasure while breastfeeding had been relegated to a mere footnote. In his medical treatise on the relationship between the physical and the moral, Dr. Georges Cabanis writes the following: “Several nursing mothers have confessed to me that the child suckling them made them feel a strong sensation of pleasure, shared to some degree by the reproductive organs. Other women have told me also that often the joys or pains of motherhood were accompanied by a state of orgasm of the uterus” (250). Despite Lastinger’s assertions of the influence of the encyclopedists on maternal sexuality, the idea of sexual pleasure while nursing does appear in select literary texts throughout the nineteenth century, typically with the addition of a male spectator. What role may the male gaze play in the literary representation, or perhaps in the fantasy, of maternal desire?

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, sees the infant as a solution to maternal penis envy. For Freud, this substitution naturally leads to the mother’s treatment of the child as object of desire. Freud argues that “the person in charge of him [the child], who, after all, is as a rule his mother, herself regards him with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life: she strokes him, kisses him, rocks him and quite clearly treats him as a substitute for a complete sexual object” (*Freud Reader* 288–289).² Post-Freudian feminist psychoanalysts, however, have challenged this idea as originating more in the male gaze of the analyst than in the female psyche. As Luce Irigaray puts it, “Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is a more or less complacent facilitator for the working out of man’s fantasies” (100). However, although she objects to Freud’s phallocentrism, Irigaray does not deny the ambiguity of maternal sexuality as it exists in a patriarchal society:

In her relation to the child [the mother] finds compensatory pleasure for the frustrations she encounters all too often in sexual relations proper. Thus maternity supplants the deficiencies of repressed female sexuality.... Man, identified with his son, rediscovers the pleasure of maternal coddling; woman retouches herself in fondling that part of her body: her baby-penis-clitoris. (101)

In this model, then, maternal breastfeeding provides sexual gratification for both sexes: for the woman through her child’s caresses, and for the man through a regressive identification with the (presumed male) nursling. Freud articulates this identification as well as the voyeuristic element in his description of the infant’s sexual satisfaction: “No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can

escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life” (Freud, *Three Essays* 60). For Freud, the (male) infant’s sexual gratification takes centre stage and forms the basis for much of Freud’s later theories on sexual instinct. The mother’s sexualization of the nursing relationship is a secondary result of the mother’s frustration at not having a penis.

Building on Freud’s theories of infant development, Melanie Klein describes the process of projective identification of the infant with the mother, which involves the infant projecting parts of its ego into the mother. Although this type of identification can lead to the rejection of the mother along with the bad ego parts of the infant, it also promotes the infant’s interdependence with the mother (Likierman 157-160). This identification of the infant with its mother, or more specifically with its mother’s breast, can also be a source of unconscious anxiety centred on the maternal figure. As Klein argues, “The phantasy of forcefully entering the object gives rise to anxieties relating to the dangers threatening the subject from within the object, that is, the fear of being controlled and persecuted inside the object” (11). This suggests a link between male anxiety and the perception of the mother’s breast, and may explain some of the ambiguity in the male spectator’s interpretation of the mother-infant relationship.

According to Julia Kristeva, since vaginal maternal *jouissance* (a French word meaning both orgasm and enjoyment) represents a threat to the social order of procreation required by a modern bourgeois economy, mothers must find fulfillment through another kind of *jouissance* centred in the maternal experience. Kristeva writes the following:

the fact that the mother is *other*, has no penis, but experiences *jouissance* and bears children ... is acknowledged only at the pre-conscious level: just enough to imagine that she bears children, while censoring the fact that she has experienced *jouissance* in an act of coitus, that there was a “primal scene.” Once more, the vagina and the *jouissance* of the mother are disregarded, and immediately replaced by that which puts the mother on the side of the socio-symbolic community: childbearing and procreation in the name of the father. (146-147)

This displacement of maternal *jouissance* from vaginal intercourse to the pleasures of procreation authorizes women to find pleasure exclusively in maternal activities such as breastfeeding but only if they are performed “in the name of the Father,” within the controlled heteronormative framework of patriarchy.

These complex theories of the male subjugation of maternal desire are apparent in two literary representations of the mother-infant couple in nine-

teenth-century France. Honoré de Balzac's *Memoirs of Two Young Married Women*, an epistolary novel published in 1841, tells the story of two girls who meet in convent school and their very different destinies—Renée and Louise each represent a different side of women's lives. Renée enters into a loveless marriage and places all her hopes on the joys of motherhood, whereas Louise pursues romantic love through two marriages, only to despair in the end at her continued sterility. Renée puts it the following way: "We are born to privileges; we can choose between love and motherhood. Well, I have chosen; I shall make my gods my children" (*Memoirs* 69). The usual platitudes describing motherhood as the ultimate reward of women traverse the novel, making Louise feel more and more inadequate in comparison to her friend's blooming maternal bliss. Renée writes of her future children: "I can ... find my life in theirs" (or in the original French: "*je jouirai de la vie par eux*") (*Memoirs* 44; *Mémoires* 112). Although Balzac's use of the verb *jouir*, which can mean "to enjoy" or in some contexts "to orgasm," may appear innocent here, it seems reasonable to read more into this turn of phrase than the surface meaning indicates in light of later sexual descriptions of Renée's sensations while nursing,

As in Kristeva's model of maternal *jouissance*, Renée's sexuality is focused on an alternate mode of pleasure, one linked to the maternal body. Her expectations of motherhood subtly reflect this displaced sexuality:

Maternity is an enterprise in which I have opened an enormous credit; it owes me so much that I fear it can never pay me in full ; it is charged with developing my energy, enlarging my heart, an compensating me for all things by illimitable joys. Oh! my God, grant that I not be defrauded! There lies all my future, and—oh, terrifying thought!—my virtue. (*Memoirs* 135)

Although the exact nature of the "illimitable joys" that she expects is unclear, what does seem clear is that her virtue depends on her maternal fulfillment; she, therefore, sees this fulfillment as an equal to, and indeed a sufficient substitute for, sexual relations with men other than her husband.

The sexual nature of Renée's maternal pleasure becomes most evident in her descriptions of the experience of nursing her first child (not surprisingly, a son). Here, the representation of physical pleasure is unmistakable:

The little monster took my breast and sucked: there, there was the *fiat lux!* Suddenly, I was a mother.... The little being knows absolutely nothing but our breast.... His lips are love inexpressible, and when they fasten there they cause both pain and pleasure, pleasure which stretches into pain, pain which ends in pleasure. I cannot explain to

you a sensation which radiates from my bosom to the sources of life; it seemed that a thousand rays start from that center to rejoice both heart and soul. To bear a child is nothing; to suckle it, nourish it, is to bear it for all time. Oh! Louise! there are no caresses of any lover that can equal that of the little rosy fingers which move so softly trying to clutch at life. (*Memoirs* 192)

Pierre-Georges Castex, in his preface to the novel, speculates as to Balzac’s source for such intimate information on breastfeeding—probably his sister Laure (*Comédie* I:178). Although Balzac could have easily obtained such information from his sister or even read it in contemporary medical texts, I argue that he may have also created Renée’s maternal pleasure based on his own unconscious identification with the male infant. The idea of Balzac identifying with the infant brings to mind the young protagonist Félix’s first encounter with Henriette in *The Lily in the Valley*, when Félix, whose life experiences often mirror those of Balzac himself, ecstatically says, “I buried my face in that back as a baby hides in its mother’s breast, and I kissed those shoulders all over, rubbing my cheek against them” (19).

In *Memoirs of Two Young Married Women*, Balzac tells the same story of mother-infant bliss from the mother’s point of view. However, the mother and son are not alone in their pleasure; Renée compares her son to a lover: “there are no caresses of any lover that can equal that of the little rosy fingers” (192). She then describes the emotional reaction of her habitually cold and distant elderly father-in-law as he watches her nursing his grandson: “The old grandfather is like a child himself; he looks at me admiringly. The first time I went down to breakfast and he saw me eating, and then giving suck to his grandson, he wept. The tears in his dry old eyes, where money usually shines, did me inexpressible good; it seemed to me that the good man felt my joys” (195). Renée completes the portrait of domestic felicity by describing her affection for her husband Louis, “who has first made known to her these wondrous joys ... and taught her the great art of motherhood” (196). Thus, the male spectator, source of maternal joys, is drawn into the circle of maternal desire and legitimates the mother’s pleasure within the patriarchal framework of procreation.

Emile Zola’s 1899 novel *Fécondité* (*Fruitfulness*) first strikes the reader as one long piece of natalist propaganda, with its adoration of the procreating female body and its reiteration of the timeless cult of the maternal. When Matthieu contemplates his pregnant wife Marianne, he sees her (more specifically her swollen belly) as a sacred object, not a sexual one. The narrator describes Matthieu’s emotions in the following terms: “It was higher and truer than the cult of the virgin, the cult of the mother, the glorified and beloved

mother, painful and grand, in the passion from which she suffers, for the eternal blossoming of life" (127). This adoration represents the traditional treatment of motherhood, both in literature and in Western culture, which is illustrated here by a comparison both to the Virgin Mary and to the suffering of Jesus Christ, whose self-abnegation for the greater good mothers are expected to imitate. Add to this traditional treatment of motherhood the symbolic resonance of Marianne's name in the context of French Revolutionary rhetoric on breastfeeding, which exhorts all good Republican women to nurse their own children, since Marianne was the name given to the allegory of the French Republic during the Revolution.

In addition, when a young couple comes to visit Marianne after the birth of one of her sons and Matthieu asks them when they plan to have children themselves, the young man refuses to even consider the idea, saying: "during the nine months of pregnancy and fifteen months of breast-feeding, we won't even be able to kiss each other. That's two years without the slightest caress" (231). Matthieu replies that "it is best, in fact, to abstain," advice which follows the medical beliefs of the time (231). On the face of it, then, this novel would seem to be a simple, if eloquent, repetition of the clear division between female sexuality and maternity promoted by Rousseau, which pressures women into pregnancy, nursing, and childcare and into sacrificing their sexuality for the good of the nation and of mankind.

Although these elements certainly dominate Zola's novel, an undercurrent flows just beneath the surface of the text, a small but steady stream of maternal *jouissance* that occasionally inspires the actions of both Matthieu and Marianne. Several scenes showing Marianne nursing the infant Gervais seem fraught with sexual innuendo, hinting of pleasure for the mother, for the (of course male) infant, and even for the father looking on. In one such scene, the narrator describes the symbiotic union of the mother-infant couple: "she watched him suckling eagerly, with a look of immense love, happy even when he hurt her at times, thrilled when he would drink from her too strongly, as she put it . . . —Dear, dear child ! When he suckles so hard, I feel as though my whole being merges with him, it's delightful" (233).

Following this description of the "*délice*" of breastfeeding her son, a word that can mean "delight" but also has a connotation of intense physical pleasure, Marianne looks up and sees her husband Matthieu, looking at them "very moved", and says: "You're part of it too!" ("*Tu en es aussi, toi!*") (233). Such a declaration pulls him into the sexually charged space of mother and child, and includes him in their physical pleasure. Maternal *jouissance* seems to exist primarily for the pleasure of the spectator, Matthieu, and by extension all male spectators, and focuses its gaze on the mother's exposed breast, lyrically described as "a white breast, soft as silk, whose milk swelled the

pink nipple, like a bud from which the flower of life would blossom" (244). Indeed, Marianne exposes her lactating breast again and again throughout the novel, which never fails to arouse both her husband and, it would seem, the narrator as well.

In *L'Eros et la femme chez Zola* (*Eros and Woman in Zola*), Chantal Bertrand-Jennings sees fertility in this novel as a new morality represented by the maternal figure "who is thereby cleansed of the original sin of sexuality ... therefore ... woman can only truly be accepted as a mother sanctified by her child" (93). Returning to Kristeva's concept of maternal *jouissance*, although the traditional definition of female sexuality, focused on sexual intercourse, may be denied to the maternal figure in Balzac and Zola, both she and the male spectator manage to find an alternative source of gratification in the experience and the fantasy of breastfeeding. Kristeva argues the following: "The loving mother, different from the caring and clinging mother, is someone who has ... an Other with relation to whom the child will serve as go-between. She will love her child with respect to that Other, and it is through a discourse aimed at that Third Party that the child will be set up as 'loved' for the mother" (251). Both the orgasmic pleasure of Renée nursing her son and the spectacle of Marianne offering her breast to her twelve children (and by extension, to the French nation) are intended for the eyes of a third party: whether it be the husband-lover, the male author, or even the reader who participates in the mothers' pleasure, the mediation of the male gaze legitimizes maternal *jouissance* insofar as it encourages women to fulfill their conjugal and national duty of raising strong and happy young citizens.

In *Le Sein dévoilé* (*The Breast Unveiled*), Dominique Gros discusses the complexity of cultural representations of the breast and the insistence on seeing the breast as either sexual or maternal. She argues the following: "In our societies, the male psyche is incapable of conceiving the fact of the female, and especially the lactating female, as a specific and irreducible reality.... The ambiguity comes most often from the male gaze. Woman, as for her, knows from experience that her breasts can be for her child or for her partner in turn" (112). This same ambiguity is apparent in nineteenth-century medical and literary discourse as well as in psychoanalytic theory: sensual breastfeeding is tolerated by patriarchal culture so long as it remains subjugated by the gaze of the male "Other." When maternal *jouissance* transgresses the boundaries of patriarchal control, then it becomes "mastomania," the vice described by Doctor Witkowski in 1898, indulged in only by "hysterical nursing women" (67). Still seen by contemporary Western culture as primarily sexual, the maternal breast continues to be a focal point for both male fantasies and male anxieties regarding the hidden undercurrents of maternal sexuality.

Endnotes

¹ All translations of French texts are my own, except as indicated in the works cited list.

²Freud's footnote to this statement reads: "Anyone who considers this 'sacrilege' may be recommended to read Havelock Ellis's views (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. III, *Analysis of the Sexual Impulse*, 2nd ed., 1913)."

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