

Mothers for Sale: The case of the Wet Nurse in the Ancient Greek and Roman World. An overview

Madres a la venta: El caso de la nodriza en el mundo griego y romano

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Recibido el 24 de agosto de 2017

Aceptado el 22 de mayo de 2018

BIBLID [1134-6396(2020)27:1; 127-140]

<http://dx.doi.org/10.30827/arenal.v27i1.6354>

ABSTRACT

Both literary and material evidence suggest that wet nurses (women who took care of babies without being their mothers) played a central role within ancient families. While they were often beloved members of those families, they were also ambiguous and elusive social figures. This could be surprising if we consider that wet nurses saved many lives and hugely helped mothers. I will try to investigate the figure of the wet nurse through a comparison with the prostitute, and by focusing on her maternity. It seems clear that the conditions and life-style of wet nurses were not significantly different in ancient Greece and Republican Rome, and I almost exclusively base my speculation on Roman Imperial evidence. By using the concept of *longue durée*, I will also try to make comparisons with other historical periods, in order to strengthen my reconstruction.

Key words: Wet nurse. Sexual diseases. Breastfeeding. Motherhood. Ancient Greece and Rome.

RESUMEN

Tanto los testimonios literarios como los restos materiales sugieren que las nodrizas (las mujeres que cuidan bebés sin ser sus madres biológicas) jugaron un papel fundamental en las familias antiguas. A pesar de que llegaron a ser personas queridas por las familias, también aparecen como figuras ambiguas y esquivas. Esta situación puede resultar sorprendente, si consideramos que las nodrizas salvaron vidas y fueron de gran ayuda para las madres. En este artículo, pretendo investigar la imagen de la nodriza a través de su comparación con la prostituta, y centrándome en su maternidad.

Palabras clave: Nodriza. Enfermedades sexuales. Lactancia. Maternidad. Grecia y Roma en la antigüedad.

SUMARIO

1.—The sad story of Amalia Bagnacavalli, wet nurse. A never-ending story. 2.—Analogies between wet nurse and prostitute vs. portrayal of the ideal wet nurse. 3.—Saying wet nurse is saying mother... 4.—Conclusion. 5.—Bibliography.

1.—*The sad story of Amalia Bagnacavalli, wet nurse. A never-ending story*

When I first started working on this issue, I was upset by a book entitled *Amalia's Tale*¹. The provocation is not only the pathos of Amalia's very sad tale, but also that the author, Professor David Kertzer, writes a book that purports to be neither an academic essay nor a historical novel, but which is, in some ways, both. Amalia's world is very far from the ancient Greek and Roman world: we are instead in late 19th century Italy, a time that is plagued by poverty, prostitution, venereal diseases and legal-religious mores that forced unwed mothers to give up their new-borns to institutions where they would be nursed by strangers. However, there are things that very hardly change in their essence over the centuries. Christian Laes, speaking of midwives —social characters very similar to wet nurses for many reasons, as we'll see— borrows the Braudelian notion of *longue durée* to describe traditions and working methods —and I would add prejudices— concerning these kinds of women.

Amalia Bagnacavalli was an illiterate young woman from the mountains near Bologna: she was under the thumb of her mother-in-law. She was forced by her husband's mother to take in a child from the city's foundling home to wet nurse. Bologna had been part of the Papal States, where Ecclesiastic authorities were particularly worried in those years by the increasing number of illegitimate children and of new-borns' dead bodies showing up in the cities (above all in the rivers). Both phenomena were considered a huge offence to the genuine Catholic family and public decency. To contain them, the State established "brefotrofi": foundling hospitals for abandoned children where unmarried women, often prostitutes, were forced to give birth and leave their offspring.

As an obvious consequence, wet nurses were needed to suckle those miserable new-borns, whose chances of surviving were dramatically low (infant formula was invented in the 1920s; stored animal milk only became safe to drink after the invention of pasteurisation and sterilisation). The majority of them were born with congenital syphilis; peasants forced to mercenary feeding by poverty often contracted syphilis from the infant assigned them and they usually spread the disease to their husbands and their own children. Entire families were tragically ruined in this way, like Amalia's one. She was not a prostitute, but still, she bore the huge stigma of a venereal disease. In any case, wet-nursing was not considered exactly a "noble" activity. Unexpectedly, she decided to take the very modern step of suing the foundling home and its aristocratic board...but this is another story.

1. Kertzer, 2008. To have a rough idea of how big the issue of transmitting syphilis through wet nurses' nipples was, it is sufficient to take a look at the list of publications from the 19th century at the end of the book.

At the very end, to avoid the huge burden of her past, she had to give up her native place and her surname, her very identity.

2.—*Analogies between wet nurse and prostitute vs. portrayal of the ideal wet nurse*

The sad story of Amalia pushes us to reflect on the life conditions of those mothers (prostitutes, wet nurses), whose identity, degree of morality and social functions were affected by their sexuality and the mercenary use of the body implicit in their miserable jobs².

Very generally speaking, over the centuries in Europe, wet nursing was considered a very humble and controversial job, and wet nurses as shady and suspicious characters³. The Catholic Church, in particular, disapproved of these poor women⁴. Just to give an example, many European settlers in North America believed that an infant who is suckled by a wet nurse would bear the “evil eye” as an adult⁵. This is particularly surprising if we take into consideration the fact that wet nurses saved many lives through the centuries and gave huge help to mothers in those first few crucial years of their infants’ lives. .

So, why? When did this negative feeling start? Now, finally, we go back to the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. By reflecting on many features concerning wet nurses in the ancient world, I realized that they had much in common with the social figure of the prostitute.

First of all, they were working women. Going out alone and working was not considered appropriate behaviour for respectable women. They worked using their bodies. They worked using erogenous parts of their bodies.

Moreover, it is necessary to spend some words on the specific kind of work of the wet nurse: breastfeeding⁶. Breastfeeding was itself thought to be something embarrassing, preferably not to be shown, as it happens sometimes today, too. As nowadays, likely there was not unanimity of opinion about it; the modern availability of formula milk has significantly changed our perceptions on breastmilk, but before this, breastfeeding had to be considered something essentially positive. However, from the sources, we gain the impression that it was considered a gesture ascribable to a primitive and savage dimension, something close to animal nature. We have to keep in mind that, from Greek medicine until the 17th century

2. Laes, 2010: 266.

3. Pedrucci, 2013 (see Demosthenes, *Against Eubulides*, 57, 42). Cf. n. 35.

4. D’Amelia, 1997: esp. 94

5. Jones 1951; Djéribi, 1998: 42. This study is based on 170 reports collected between 1940 and 1946 (90 Italian, 40 Jewish, 9 Irish, 6 Polish, 4 Syrian, 3 Greek, 2 Armenian, 2 Russian, 1 German, 1 Hungarian, 4 unidentified). On breastfeeding and the evil eye see also Pedrucci, 2015.

6. Pedrucci, 2013.

(discovery of lymphatic vases), breastmilk was considered “cooked” (therefore white and lighter) menstrual blood.

Moreover, being of the same nature as blood, according to the ancients, breastmilk was a vehicle of transferring values, vigour and moral principles into the bodies and minds of babies, besides, of course, genetic characteristics⁷: even as late as the 19th century in France, a law was proposed to ban disreputable mothers from nursing their own children so that their immoral traits would not be transmitted via their milk⁸.

So, if this was the situation, why did ancient Greek and Roman women hire wet nurses?

Greek women probably used to breastfeed personally. If they couldn't, they hired wet nurses or they tried to use animal milk with “feeding-bottles” (even if it was dangerous for the baby, because of poor hygienic conditions and potential adulteration, by germs and bacteria, in raw milk. On the other hand, early weaning was very dangerous for the infant as well)⁹.

Similarly, Roman mothers during the Republican period used to breastfeed. However, *matronae* from the Imperial period apparently didn't want to breastfeed anymore. Besides the above-mentioned reasons for not breastfeeding, we can add more “frivolous” reasons¹⁰: breastfeeding can be painful and tiring, sometimes even boring, and can ruin physical shape. It also can be considered a job, whilst having a wet nurse was a status symbol¹¹.

Physicians and philosophers never stopped arguing about the qualities of maternal milk and the risks of wet nursing, but they used to work for the elites and therefore tended to conform to the popular trends of elite opinion¹².

7. Dasen, 2010. On criteria of selection, see e.g. Quintilian, I, 1.4 opting for a woman with good character and proper use of language; cf. Tacitus, *Dialogues*, 29; Aulus Gellius, XII, 1, 17.

8. Pedrucci, 2016a. Even before this time the debate was heated. The famous physician, botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus, for instance, published an essay in which he condemned the use of wet nurses: *Nutrix noverca*. Like the traditional wicked step-mother, the paper suggests, wet-nurses are disastrous for children; mothers should breastfeed their children themselves. Linnaeus doesn't stand alone. Some years before, the English doctor William Cadogan had argued exactly the same, in his *Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children*. And some years later Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his extremely influential *Émile ou de l'éducation*, in which he also, in the context of his “back to nature” philosophy, argues passionately for maternal breastfeeding.

9. Garnsey, 1991.

10. For this reason, they were harshly disapproved by moralists, especially Favorinus (in Aulus Gellius, XII, 1, 1-23). As I have tried to argue, breastfeeding was a personal choice and likely not all women from the Imperial period decided to avoid breastfeeding. See Pedrucci, 2018.

11. Pedrucci, 2013: 259.

12. Rousselle, 1988: p. 55.

Generally speaking, since almost exclusive breastfeeding lasted around 2-3 years, co-breastfeeding (by the mother and one or more wet nurses) was probably the norm¹³.

Overall then, Imperial Romans thought that breastfeeding approaches women to animality, a dimension to which they were thought to belong by the fact itself of being women. Moreover, nurses were the social figure closest to children, animals *par excellence* in the Greek and Roman cultures. In this regard, we should recall all the mythological tales in which infants are suckled by animals. Human-animal breastfeeding in the other direction seems to be attested in the classical sources, too¹⁴. One very interesting detail is that not only was the *lupa* (she-wolf) the ancestral wet nurse of all Romans through Romulus, but *lupa* is also the Latin word for prostitute¹⁵.

Going back to ancient humoral theory, breastfeeding implies the exchange of humoral fluids. First, the liquid element is typically feminine according to the ancients and it bears some inherent negativity. Secondly, this exchange might cause the transmission of sexual diseases, like syphilis for example. The existence of syphilis in Europe before the discovery of America, indeed, is a very controversial issue¹⁶. Some scholars during the 18th and 19th centuries believed that the symptoms of syphilis in its tertiary form were described by Hippocrates in Classical Greece¹⁷. Skeletons in Pompeii and Metaponto in Italy with damage somewhat similar to that caused by congenital syphilis have also been found. However, other sexually transmitted diseases are described by later authors and in Greek papyri¹⁸, and they could be mentioned in wet nursing contracts, as we will see below.

However, that both wet nurses and prostitutes were put in connection with sexual behaviour and morality by ancient sources is a matter of fact. If the motive concerning the prostitute is not far to seek, the reason justifying the inclusion of the wet nurse has to be found in the medical discourse. Ancient physicians used to write down vade-mecums to guide families (both lower and upper classes: this is an important detail)¹⁹ in the right choice of a wet nurse. All in all, the perfect candidate had to be a sort of Mary Poppins *ante litteram*: a paragon, healthily,

13. Pedrucci, 2015; Pedrucci, 2018.

14. Pedrucci, 2016a.

15. It might be of interest to note that the nurse in elegy is transformed into the figure of *lena* (female procurer), companion, witch, or elderly female counselor; and she served to remove the attractive young woman from the poet's exclusive control and to pervert her sexual behavior, see Joshel, 1986: 10.

16. See e.g. Lobdell-Owsley, 1974.

17. Bollaert, 1864: cclvii (with ancient *loci*).

18. Henneberg-Henneberg, 1994; Henneberg-Henneberg, 2002.

19. Bradley, 1986: 201. We do have evidence that wet-nursing was also practiced at lower social levels, see: Garnsey, 1991: 61; Sparrenboom, 2014: 148, 157 (the author suggests that poor wet nurses took advantage of breastfeeding's natural contraceptive function).

timely, physically, psychologically, materially, incorporeally, morally, and ethically. Doctors insisted that the nurse should be prudent, clean, tidy, not ill-tempered, sympathetic, merry, easy going, gentle, self-controlled: quite a lot for just one person! Above all, she was supposed to be in good health —both mental and physical²⁰— with previous pregnancies, meeting specific physical requirements (e.g., the form of the nipples), clean (see also breastfeeding's degree of religious pollution)²¹, sympathetic, cheerful and dedicated, along with being a symbol of self-control in her drinking and sexuality²² (herein is another interesting analogy with prostitutes: both used to drink wine, respectable women could not. Wet-nurses indeed had to, because wine was considered good for milk production, but there was always the risk that they drank to excess)²³. The wet nurse's good breeding, and her sexual and drinking habits were deemed to affect the way she was able to perform her duties (e.g. not leaving the child unattended because of sexual appetite; coitus was said to change her affection to the baby, while excessive drinking to make her sickly)²⁴. the quality of her milk (coitus was deemed to spoil the milk)²⁵ and thus the baby's health²⁶.

A more realistic portrait of wet nurses and additional information concerning their lifestyle may be also inferred from the contracts in Greek papyri made between the women and the families that hired them. Whether all recommendations were fulfilled in daily practice is, nonetheless, reasonably in doubt (also for economic reasons if considering for instance diet issues)²⁷. From this kind of evidence, we find further analogies between wet nurses and prostitutes.

Not-married (and of course free) wet nurses had male masters, with whom, it was typically stipulated, they could not have sexual intercourse (but they likely had)²⁸. Indeed, they could not have sexual intercourse at all, as already mentioned. For this reason, the married ones had to cut their usual cohabitations with their

20. Soranus, II, 12, 19-20; 14, 24; Oribasius, Coll. Med. lib. incert., 15, 17; 16, 3; Aulus Gellius, XII, 1.5; Mnesitheus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 15, 2, 8; Rufus apud Oribasius, 13, 3-4.

21. Breastfeeding women, indeed, can be excluded from religious activities. We have so-called sacred laws in ancient Greece, by which access to the temple is forbidden to breastfeeding women, see Pedrucci, 2018.

22. Abou Aly, 1996.

23. Molinos Tejada, 2001.

24. Soranus, II, 12, 19.

25. Oribasius, *ibid.*, 15, 4; 13, 5.

26. Oribasius, *ibid.*, 20, 8; 20, 27; Soranus, I, 17, 38; see e.g. aetiology and onset of epilepsy: Oribasius, *ibid.*, 13, 13, 28; Soranus, II, 14, 27. A healthy body was, for instance, that which was in harmony with the four classical elements. So, too much sex might disequilibrate the body, while too little of it made one apathetic and melancholic, see: Rousselle, 1988; Shaw, 1998; cf. Harper, 2013: 57-8.

27. Abou Aly, 1996: 90.

28. Tawfik, 1997: 944, 947.

husbands. Among the unmarried, some free wet nurses might usually have bodily union with more than one male (likely with their masters, as already suggested). Hence, in the absence of this stipulation, the baby could become the victim of such relationships either by contagion of diseases (*molysma*: might this word also indicate venereal diseases?) that might be passed to it from the man via the woman, or at least by contamination (*miasma*) if she touched the infant without being clean²⁹.

Indeed, the reality that economic issues prompted some girls and women to engage their reproductive systems as a source of income—in wet-nursing and/or prostitution—leads to the inescapable fact that they were put at risk of viral and bacterial infections, in terms of venereal diseases and benign and malignant breast conditions. The big medical interest in the nurse's health seems to suggest that it was believed that diseases could be transmitted from the nurse to the nursling (maybe, but not necessarily, syphilis)³⁰.

Moreover, it was typically stipulated in contracts that the wet nurse could not feed more than one baby and she had to use her own milk³¹. This was likely because of the genetic implications connected with humoral exchanges, of course, and because she had to give all her attention to just one child. But could we assume that, above all among lower classes, mothers helped other mothers who were unable to suckle their children by offering them their breasts, as happens sometimes in the book *Amalia's Tale*?³² Maternal health, incapacity, or unavailability could have caused a demand for wet nurses in rich and poor households alike. This could have broad implications with respect to transmissible diseases.

More generally, did surrogate nursing specifically define individual identity and thus, social status and degree of morality? Yet, how was the degree of individual morality measured in antiquity? Roman society's identity was rooted in the idea that social class determined moral behaviour: one path led to public honour (*matronae* and virgins), the other to shame (prostitutes)³³. Following on from here, one might

29. Tawfik, 1997: 947.

30. Besides trivial features and erroneous notions. By being blood, human milk could transmit physical and mental traits. See e.g.: Pedrucci, 2016a; Pedrucci, 2016b; Pedrucci, 2017. Cf. n. 36.

31. Tawfik, 1997: 946.

32. For co-breastfeeding, see Pedrucci, 2018.

33. Harper, 2013. Cf. Perry, 2014: 1: "Gendered attitude toward morality, sexual conduct, and social status complicated a woman's manumission and passage to citizenship, as lawmakers and social commentators needed to reconcile her experiences as a slave with the expectations and moral rigor required of the female citizen. In a woman's case, the primary obstacle was that the sexual identities of a female slave and a female citizen were fundamentally incompatible, as the former was principally defined by her sexual availability and the latter by sexual integrity. A woman's sexual conduct was so critical to evaluating her standing and moral worth that it completely overshadowed and nearly subsumed all of her other virtues or positive personal qualities". The (wet) nurse was the most commonly freed female slave and a person who frequently had significant emotional ties to

wonder whether surrogate-breastfeeding was socially deemed as a core feature of wet nurses' identity in the Greek and Roman world. Even so, bearing in mind that a woman's worth was measured in terms of her degree of fertility in ancient Greece, the good health of her uterus was a mirror of her mental health as well as her social function. Briefly, women's social identity seems to be a subcategory of sexual and reproductive health.

We continue with analogies. Speaking of social identity, we should examine who exactly these women were. Both prostitutes and wet nurses were mostly slaves and foreigners. They could also be free or freed women, for example in wartime when they were forced to work by necessity. Wet nurses could be part of the family (Greek *oikos*, Latin *familia*) before the child's birth³⁴ or could be hired by stipulating a regular working contract; they were chosen not only for the task of nursing the new-born, but also to rear it. They had to attend the delivery, to wash diapers, to take the baby out, to bathe it, to lull, to serve all its practical needs. No doubt, ancient authors stigmatized wet-nursing as a humble profession³⁵. It was not possible to have a Greek or Roman slave, therefore they were mostly foreigners (preferably Egyptian or Thracian in Greece: tattoos clearly showing their origins; Greek in Rome, to facilitate the nursling learning Greek language from the very beginning)³⁶. Like other slaves, they could be selected at the markets (eg., Eurykleia, Ulysses' nurse: *Od.* I 430. See also the *columna lactaria* in Rome: it probably was a spot where nurses for hire could be found when needed, but also a place to bring poor infants in need of milk)³⁷ or be appropriated as war booty. There is evidence that several female captives of wealthy origins were forced to work as educators and nurses for children. Later on, in fact, nurses took care of the general education of the child and followed the *protégé* in his/her adult life.

Despite occasional criticism, nurses as a rule seemed to have enjoyed respect and were often praised by their masters for their conduct. Sources refer to several nurses who were granted their freedom on account of their loyalty and good conduct. The fact that they were often portrayed as old women, above all in Greek literature and art, might represent an intention to express the ideal of personal renunciation that is expected from them³⁸. Indeed, many instances of deep love towards nurses are attested, especially in gravestones, and, generally speaking, the wet nurse's portrait is a very positive one. However, we have to consider the

the freeborn members of the family. Perry's work suggests how controversial the status of the (wet) nurse was and to what extent her identity was linked to her sexuality.

34. Medina Quintana, 2010: 205.

35. Kosmopoulou, 2001: 286. Cf. n. 3.

36. Dasen, 2010.

37. *Lactaria Columna in Foro Olitorio dicta, quod ibi infantes lacte alendos deferebant* (Paul. Fest. p. 118). See: Bradley, 1986: 214; Fildes, 1986: 30.

38. Birchler Emery, 2008.

fact that, as usual, we have a very partial overview: our sources reflect only the aristocratic, male point of view. Moreover, on this particular point, nurses who had no concern for their nurslings and nurslings who had no affection for their nurses have left no commemorative evidence of their attitudes, and it cannot be simply assumed the nurse's relationship with a child was always warm and loving³⁹.

On the other hand, we do have plenty of evidence of fears and doubts concerning wet nurses. Like the midwife⁴⁰, the wet nurse had an infant's life in her hands. The folklore shows many legends on bad nurses: for instance they were associated with the *strix*, a nocturnal bird who was supposed to fly into houses and suck blood from sleeping babies⁴¹.

How should we interpret the apparent difference between the description of the perfect wet nurse in literary sources and the evidence concerning real wet nurses, as disclosed, for example, in late contracts? Christian Laes⁴² tried to solve this discrepancy with reference to the midwife (another slave character in ancient societies) using the concept of differential equations. I think we can use the same arguments for the wet nurse. Possibly, aristocrats did not feel at ease with the idea that their children were being entrusted to the care of social outsiders, even though this was the norm. The idealized representation, drawn for example by Soranus, would be an example of the use of differential equations, in the process of which a crucial figure in the life of a child is being upgraded to the level of a positive, reassuring and professional figure⁴³. In this very same process, the aspects that refer to a lower social status are subtly masked or ignored. Incidentally, according to Laes, this upgrading testifies the great value attached to children in Roman society⁴⁴.

3.—*Saying wet nurse is saying mother...*

Finally, we come to wet nurses' own children. If prostitutes were nearly inevitably mothers, wet nurses were necessarily mothers. To be better wet nurses, they were actually supposed to have more than one child. Nevertheless, their own infants are never mentioned. One may speculate that when wet nurses took on the task of breastfeeding, their own children had been weaned⁴⁵, had died, had been

39. Bradley, 1986: 221.

40. Laes, 2010: 270.

41. Mencacci, 1995; Pedrucci, 2018.

42. Laes, 2010: 278f. Cf. Pedrucci, 2018.

43. To a physician, if we speak of midwives, see Laes, 2010.

44. *Contra* e.g. Bradley, 1994.

45. But it would have been an extremely early and dangerous weaning. Indeed, from Soranus (II 19) we learn that the wet nurse was supposed to have two or three children, and the youngest was supposed to be two or three months old.

bottle-fed from birth (with high risk of premature death)⁴⁶, or, simply, were not important enough to be mentioned in the texts. It is possible that a nurse's child moved into the household with her (or was already there, in case of a slave nurse)⁴⁷ and became, for a time, a companion of her charge. Indeed, the bond between the nursling and the nurse's own child was recognized in Roman society, not least by the term *conlacteus*⁴⁸. As we saw, they could be illegitimate children, like the prostitutes' ones. Still, for us they are ghosts.

At this point, we have enough elements to reflect on wet nurses' maternity. We might say that they were mothers twice, therefore their mothering not only was double but also ambiguous.

First of all, it was a maternity for sale.

Of course, historically, we have to think of a different kind of parenting and mothering: at the time, mothers were not left alone in rearing children. In our "Western" society, removal from the mother or even occasional replacement of the mother by a professional is regarded as a hardship for a young child, but the overall impression gained from (above all) Roman sources is that there was a wider network of people involved with the various stages of a child's life: especially nurses and pedagogues.

Should we speak of wet nurses as surrogate, substitute or delegated mothers?⁴⁹ The last moniker seems to be more appropriate, since surrogate and substitute should be used only for social equals who actually took the place of a dead or absent mother, whilst a wet nurse was often a deputy or a representative for the mother and was in charge of the care and discipline of the child, duties that are consistent with the definition of delegating. From the child's point of view, she was possibly experienced as an attachment figure, i.e. possibly as a duplicate of the mother⁵⁰.

Towards their own children, their maternity was incomplete, maimed. Evidently, wet nurses were asked to favour someone else's child over their own⁵¹. When they moved into the new house with their offspring or if their children were born there, she likely breastfed them as well, but only after the master's one: we

46. Fildes, 1986: 35; Garnsey, 1991: 61; Dixon, 1988: 128; Kosmopoulou, 2001: 285.

47. More likely, however, slave children were separated from their mothers at birth. This had to be dreadful for all concerned. Even relatively modest homes, in fact, generally contained slaves or dependent workers, and children and youths were exchanged as apprentices. See Dixon, 1988: 235.

48. Mencacci, forthcoming. Likely also in Greek society, see Pedrucci, 2018.

49. Dixon, 1988. Mencacci, forthcoming, speaks of vicarious; I also speak of "mother-like figures" and "attachment figures" in Pedrucci, 2018.

50. Pedrucci, 2017.

51. Bradley, 1986: 153.

know that, after the first milk feed, the milk could become a bit sour⁵². Might we say that this was a second quality of milk that was for the wet nurse's child, if present?

It was also, as we said, a forgotten, neglected maternity. As slaves, their maternity could furthermore be a coerced, violated one⁵³.

Compared with the nursling's mother, wet nurses adopted a so-called proximal parenting strategy⁵⁴. In fact, sources suggest an alloparental care strategy: mothers fostered the mental capacities of their children (distal strategy), whilst female attendants (nurses and other female relatives) were responsible for the physical care of the infants (proximal strategy). In this case, we could infer that children (maybe also as adults) were more attached (as in "attachment parenting") to wet nurses⁵⁵; whilst nowadays, the role of today's baby-sitters or nannies is very different from the ancient nurses' one: their work is strictly defined in time and space, babysitters and mothers do not share the same time and space and nannies are just supposed to watch over children but to avoid physical bonds⁵⁶. Therefore, towards their masters' children the ancient wet nurse seems to be even more maternal than the mother herself, at least from a modern "Western" point of view. As a quite obvious consequence, the wet nurse could become an object of jealousy and suspicion.

Her own feelings towards the nursling, in fact, might have been not so benevolent and unselfish: it was an unequal relationship, based on lack of freedom.

52. At least, this is what we might infer from some sources, see: Pedrucci, 2014; Pedrucci, 2016b.

53. Gregorio Navarro, 2015. Indeed, they were forced to have children with their masters, to increase the number of slaves but also, likely, in case of female infertility. Ancient cases of modern surrogate mothers?

54. Two different parenting styles during the first months of life have been described in the literature: the proximal and the distal style. Distal strategy implies an exclusive dyadic relationship between child and caretaker, based on "metalizing" through eye contact and communication. It is predominant in the Western industrial/post-industrial middle-class. It aims for psychological autonomy. Components of this parenting style were adopted by ancient mothers. Proximal strategy is a care strategy with several attachment figures for the child, based on constant body contact but shared attention. It is predominant in traditional subsistence societies. It aims for relational adaption. Components of this parenting style were adopted by female attendants, including wet nurses. See: Keller, 2009; Räuchle, 2015. Cf. Pedrucci, 2018; Pedrucci-Scapini, 2017.

55. There is one more point to support this claim: we see, in tragedy and epic for instance, that characters remain attached to their "nurse", to the woman who cared for them since infancy, the old, faithful female slave (e.g. Phaedra's wet nurse or Eurykleia): they have long stopped breastfeeding the child, but the child, as an adult is *attached* to this maternal figure, likely an attachment created through proximal parenting. Several ancient sources seem to clearly state that physical contact (especially through breastfeeding) creates affective bonds more than blood kinship, see: Phaedrus, III 15; Aulus Gellius, XII 6, 23. Cfr.: Plato, *Republic*, V 460b-c; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII 9, 1159a27-33; Plutarch, *The Education of Children*, 5, 3CD; Porphyry, *Plotinus*, 3. See Pedrucci, 2018.

56. In fact, nannies are neglected and often forgotten by the children they took care of. See Coles, 2015: 2. For conflicts between mother and wet nurse, see e.g. Statius, *Thebaid*, V 613-33, VI 146-67. See Pedrucci, 2018.

Indeed, what feelings could possibly be cultivated in a mother forced to leave her own child to breastfeed another baby, exposing her child to almost certain death by doing so, or, even worse, in a mother forced to replace her dead child with another one?

4.—*Conclusion*

My starting question was: why do we have, on the one hand, in the ancient Greek and Roman sources, depictions of the wet nurse as a beloved member of the family, and, on the other hand, indirect clues and allusions that make us think that she was perceived as an ambivalent and potentially dangerous character (as in other historical periods)? To answer this question, I had to work almost exclusively with Roman Imperial evidence. My conclusion is that the feelings of aristocratic parents towards the wet nurse —at least during the Imperial period— were extremely ambivalent basically for two reasons: 1) analogies between the wet-nurse and the prostitute: both female social figures who used to work by selling their bodies; 2) jealousy and envy (and possibly guilt) on the part of the mother towards the wet-nurse, since the latter had a closer and more physical relationship with the baby. Trying to look at the situation the other way around, it is also likely that the wet-nurse herself did not always have good feelings towards the baby she had to take care of, since it was not the baby she was forced to abandon. To strength my hypothesis, I have used examples from other historical periods, trying to argue that this can be considered a “never-ending story”.

5.—*Bibliography*

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