

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The other mother: ancient and early Byzantine approaches to wet-nursing and mothering

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### Abstract

In premodernity, a time when human milk was the only safe means of infant nutrition, and in societies, such as those of classical antiquity and early Byzantium, where breastfeeding was considered servile work, wet-nursing was both a necessary and widespread occupation. Despite the social demand for the profession, public discourses around wet nurses were mostly negative, while their work was treated with both admiration and scorn. In an attempt to understand ancient and early Byzantine approaches to the wet nurse, this article takes a matricentric perspective. It investigates various discourses (rhetorical, moralist, philosophical, theological, hagiographical, medical and contractual) which establish the wet nurse as an essential part of the institution of motherhood, as a social and moral category whose work, way of life and behaviour are constantly defined, controlled and regulated. These discourses nevertheless tell us much more about the anxieties and preoccupations of the societies that produced them and much less about actual contemporary wet nurses. The choice of an investigation encompassing antiquity up to early Byzantium, an extension rarely seen in existing studies, further illuminates the mechanics and dynamics of the ideologies around the wet nurse, as these are preserved or evolve in time.

**Keywords:** wet nurse; mothering; feminism; antiquity; early Byzantium

### I. Wet-nursing and the demands of mothering

In premodernity, a time when human milk was the only secure means of infant nutrition,<sup>1</sup> there existed three categories of nursing women. In the first there were biological mothers who breastfed their own children. The second category involved women who lived with or were related to the biological mother's family: slaves, members of the extended family, friends or neighbours. The third category consisted of mercenary wet nurses of low social status: free, freed or enslaved mothers. Apart from keeping the child alive through breastfeeding, the surrogate mother was also responsible for its daily care and first social training.<sup>2</sup> This threefold duty, performed by either the biological or surrogate mother, reflects the three demands of mothering, 'preservation, growth, and social acceptability', identified by the American feminist Sara Ruddick in her famous *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*.

<sup>1</sup> Hill et al. (1987); Matthews Grieco (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Beaucamp (1982); Fildes (1986) and (1988); Dixon (1988) 104–67; Bradley (1991); Karydas (1991); Vilatte (1991); Ray (2004); Pedrucci (2013); Sperling (2013); Dasen (2015) 219–358; Centlivres Challet (2017); Marshall (2017).

In Ruddick's definition, 'to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance and training'.<sup>3</sup> She describes such 'maternal works' as a series of practices that 'are socially organized activities identified by their constitutive aims ... The aim of maternal practices is to meet the demands of vulnerable "children" for safety and well-being'.<sup>4</sup> As Ruddick rightly points out, even though the demands of maternal practice are universal, the ways in which mothers respond to and experience them are culturally variable and subject to historical change. Hence according to Ruddick's definition of maternity, an individual becomes a mother chiefly by working towards satisfying children's daily needs rather than solely through pregnancy and giving birth. Mothering is, therefore, 'ubiquitous ... not because adult humans are inherently motherly but because human children are inherently vulnerable in ways that demand what we call "mothering"'.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, any person involved in maternal work can act as mother, regardless of blood relation or gender: biological mother, (wet) nurse, father, adoptive parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend, neighbour. To fulfil children's demands, and in so doing to engage in the work of mothering, one or more of these individuals are not driven by instinct, but by rational thinking ('maternal thinking' in Ruddick's terminology) that leads to actions of loving care.

In short, what makes a mother is not the act of giving birth, but an individual's engagement in mothering, which is realized through a twofold commitment: maternal thinking and work. This idea is not new, as attested by a fragment of the *Oikonomikos* of Dio Chrysostom (AD 40–115), which has survived in John Stobaeus' (fifth century AD) *Anthology*: Ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν τίκτειν ἀνάγκης ἔργον ἐστὶ, τὸ ἐκτρέφειν δὲ φιλοστοργίας ('To give birth is a work of necessity, but to raise someone [is a work of] affection', 4.28.13).<sup>6</sup> A philosophical understanding of mothering is present also in other ancient authors, such as Dio's teacher, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus (ca. AD 30–100; *Discourse 3*: 'That Women Should Study Philosophy') and the anonymous neopythagorean writers of a couple of letters addressed to women (first or second century AD; *Myia to Phyllis* and *Theano to Euboule*).<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Ruddick's work constitutes the first systematic approach to mothering as a form of philosophy that is concerned with the practical ethics of the mother's role, that is, with how to work and solve problems, leading to the successful satisfaction of children's needs and promoting their growth and development. At the same time, Ruddick's motherhood theory appears to echo the old Stoic, neopythagorean and theological ideas about mothering (examined below). Thus, while Ruddick's matricentric feminism allows us to better understand ancient and Byzantine treatments of mothering, the latter, in turn, manifest the diachronicity of Ruddick's work, illuminating aspects of it that would have otherwise remained hidden.

Concerning the mothering task of breastfeeding, the subject of the present article, which only a woman who has recently given birth can undertake, while it seems to be an apparently 'natural' gesture, like pregnancy and childbirth, it is, like other mother work described by Ruddick (for example further feeding practices, childcare and training), also a socially organized practice presenting different perceptions and ideologies over time and across cultures.<sup>8</sup> The widespread premodern practice of wet-nursing in its ancient and Byzantine manifestations, as the following discussion will show, is a striking example of this. Prevalent social ideas about the servile character of breastfeeding led elite mothers in

<sup>3</sup> Ruddick (1995) 17.

<sup>4</sup> O'Reilly and Ruddick (2009) 17; see also Ruddick (1995) xix, 18, 46, 78–81.

<sup>5</sup> O'Reilly and Ruddick (2009) 17.

<sup>6</sup> Greek text: Hense and Wachsmuth (1884–1912). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are our own.

<sup>7</sup> For the two texts and for the wet nurse as a philosopher, see Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou (2024).

<sup>8</sup> Maher (1992).

antiquity and Byzantium to refrain from nursing their own infants, who were consequently entrusted to wet nurses.<sup>9</sup> Poor women, on the other hand, resorted to wet-nursing to sustain themselves and their families.

Through their mothering work, premodern biological and surrogate mothers became part of the ‘institution of motherhood’, the way in which a given society regulates child-rearing, ‘one of its most important functions’.<sup>10</sup> As the sociologist Jessie Bernard has shown, motherhood is a fluid and mutable social category, since it is constructed by norms and ideologies of child-rearing which change over time and from culture to culture. That motherhood is a social construction defined by the historical, geographical and cultural conditions in which it emerges has also been shown by the work of many premodern historians, including Clarissa Atkinson, Nancy Demand, Susan Dixon, Elisheva Baumgarten and Amandine Marshall.<sup>11</sup>

Despite historical, geographical and cultural differences, however, motherhood has two constant significations, which are determined by the strong patriarchal character of human societies, both past and present. These two meanings, ‘one superimposed on the other’,<sup>12</sup> are termed ‘mothering’ and ‘motherhood’ by Adrienne Rich in her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which has influenced premodern historians.<sup>13</sup> ‘Mothering’ refers to ‘the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children’; ‘motherhood’ is ‘the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control’.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Ruddick’s definition of the mother, for Rich, and for the patriarchal societies she discusses, being a mother is equated with being a woman. This is also the case with the ancient and Byzantine societies in question here, yet Ruddick’s more inclusive definition is equally useful for understanding those societies’ mothering practices which at least in elite families, as stated before, were mostly undertaken not by the biological mother, but by wet and dry nurses.<sup>15</sup>

That mothering is a woman’s activity is also manifested in the Greek language, which points diachronically to a strong interconnection between women and nursing in male-dominated Greek thought. The ancient Greek word θῆλυς (‘female’), according to its etymology, correlates the category of woman with the nursing quality of the breast, its ability to produce milk and be sucked. Accordingly, the term θηλάστρια (‘the woman who breastfeeds’) was used for the wet nurse from antiquity until about the mid-20th century, when the profession of wet-nursing declined in Greece.<sup>16</sup> The modern Greek words θηλυκός (‘female’), θηλή (‘nipple’) and θηλάζω (‘to breastfeed’, ‘nurse’ or ‘suckle’) also

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hermann (1959); Bradley (1980), (1986), (1991), (1994); Joshel (1986); Dixon (1988) 141–67; Rühfel (1988); Karydas (1991); Abou Aly (1996); Holman (1997); Talbot (1997) 125 and (2017) 241; Schulze (1998); Corbier (1999); Ray (2004); Pitarakis (2009) 211–12; Dasen (2010b), (2012a), (2012b); Salzman-Mitchell (2012); Spieser (2012); Bretin-Chabrol (2015); Parca (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Bernard (1975) vii.

<sup>11</sup> Dixon (1988); Atkinson (1991); Demand (1994); Baumgarten (2004); Marshall (2015). See also Knibiehler and Fouquet (1980); Mulder-Bakker (1995); Leyser and Smith (2011); Hackworth Petersen and Salzman-Mitchell (2012); Cooper and Phelan (2017); Sánchez Romero and Cid López (2018); Pedrucci (2018), (2020c), (2020d).

<sup>12</sup> Rich (1995) 13.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Atkinson (1991) ix; Pedrucci (2020a) and (2020b).

<sup>14</sup> Rich (1995) 13, emphasis original.

<sup>15</sup> Laes (2011) 69–99; Ariantzi (2012) 162–64, 189–90; McWilliam (2013) 274–77; Vuolanto (2013) 588–90.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the meaning of *thēlastría* in ancient lexica: τὴν δὲ θηλάζουσαν Εὐπόλις τιτθὴν θηλάστριαν ὠνόμασεν (‘Eupolis called the wet nurse *thelastrian*’, Poll. *Onom.* 3.50.5–6) Greek text: Bethe (1900–1931); θηλάστριαν· τῶν παιδῶν τὴν τροφὸν διὰ τὴν θηλήν (‘*thelastrian*: children’s wet nurse’, *Moeris Lexikon* Letter theta.21) Greek text: Hansen (1998). As for 20th-century Greek dictionaries, see, for instance, Demetrakos’ lexicon (1954–1958) 7.335: θηλάστρια [θηλάζω] ἢ θηλάζουσα, ἢ βυζαίνουσα (‘*thēlastría* [thēlazō] (breastfeed) the *thēlazousa* (the woman who breastfeeds), the *buzainousa* (the woman who offers her breast for sucking)’). We are grateful to our colleague Marianna Katsoyannou for making available to us Demetrakos’ lemma.

derive from the same root. The identification of woman with nursing in the Greek language reveals a certain deep-seated mode of thought in which breastfeeding, and by extension child-rearing or mothering in Ruddick's terms, is treated as her most essential activity. In Greek culture from antiquity to the present, therefore, 'natural' performances of the female body, such as giving birth and breast-milk production, are presented through language as a means to confine women to the private-sphere role of mother as defined by the long-established institution of motherhood.

Yet the patriarchal institution of motherhood, in Greek culture as in others, has invented further mechanisms to strengthen and perpetuate its surveillance and control over mothers. One of its most efficient mechanisms is the creation of the category of the 'good mother', whose characteristics and obligations might change from culture to culture. Yet, as Rich points out, generally the 'good' mother is totally devoted to her children, having no life of her own.<sup>17</sup> The 'good' mother trope coexists with its exact opposite, the trope of the 'bad' mother, and the one is shaped and delineated by the other. The nurturing, selfless, 'good' mother is substantiated through the neglectful, self-centred, 'bad' mother and vice versa.<sup>18</sup> Ancient and Byzantine cultures established mythical and biblical ideals of good motherhood, as well as examples of bad motherhood providing contemporary women with exemplars to emulate and behaviours to avoid. In Graeco-Roman culture, the Trojan heroine Andromache, who gives up everything for her son Astyanax, was an exemplar of good motherhood, while Medea, the murderer of her children, stood for the bad mother.<sup>19</sup> In Byzantium, the ideal mother was epitomized by the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Christ and suffered at His Cross, while Herodias, who exposed the nakedness of her daughter Salome in order to achieve the decapitation of John the Baptist, was used as an example of the anti-mother.<sup>20</sup>

A similar mechanism was also created to determine and control the mothering work of the wet nurse. The 'good' nurse, like the 'good' mother, was expected to be wholly devoted to her nursling, often abandoning her own infant. The 'bad' nurse, of course, had the opposite stance and behaviour. The new mother who undertook the breastfeeding of her baby was considered 'good'. The woman who gave her newborn over to a wet nurse, on the other hand, was a 'bad' mother and a sinner in the Christian context of Byzantium.<sup>21</sup> All in all, the institution of motherhood imposed upon the lactating woman a set of strict rules and regulations to which she had to conform.

Building on the work of matricentric feminists such as Rich, Ruddick and Andrea O'Reilly,<sup>22</sup> we treat the ancient and early Byzantine wet nurse as a socially constructed category that is different not only from the category of woman, but also from that of nursing mother. If matricentric feminism posits that 'the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face, social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth, are specific to women's role and identity as mothers',<sup>23</sup> we argue that the wet nurse of these cultures encounters

<sup>17</sup> Rich (1995) 36.

<sup>18</sup> Thurer (1994); O'Reilly (2016) 12–14; Miller et al. (2017).

<sup>19</sup> For Andromache, see, for example, Bonfante (1997) 174; van Zyl Smit (2008); as for Medea, see Boedeker (1997); Given (2009); Hall (2010).

<sup>20</sup> For the Virgin, see, for example, Abrahamse (1979) 504; Nathan (2000) 150; Pitarakis (2009) 210; Peltomaa (2010). For Herodias, see Galatariotou (1984) 74; Peltomaa (2006).

<sup>21</sup> The ancient and Byzantine categories of 'good' and 'bad' nurse and mother are discussed in Joshel (1986) 7–10; Meyer (2009) 80–95; Parkin (2013) 55–58; de Wet (2015) 129–40. For the religious treatment of sinful mothers, see Stathakopoulos (2024).

<sup>22</sup> The term 'matricentric feminism' was coined by O'Reilly (2016) 2 in her attempt to create a branch of feminism 'that puts motherhood at its centre'. For matricentric feminism, motherhood is socially and historically constructed, and thus mothering is a practice.

<sup>23</sup> O'Reilly (2016) 2.

socio-economic and cultural problems and prejudices that are tied to her role and identity as surrogate mother. Even though the biological nursing mother might have to adopt a lifestyle that differs considerably from that of the non-breastfeeding mother, a fact that often places her in a more vulnerable position in terms of society's treatment and expectations, she is always in a better situation than the wet nurse who is under her control. The wet nurse is socially and economically inferior and has to become the mother of another woman's infant, often at the expense of her own child,<sup>24</sup> a tragic reality about which our ancient and early Byzantine sources remain remarkably silent. Additionally, being a mercenary mother, the wet nurse enters unfavourable contractual relations and is subject to social biases.<sup>25</sup>

In the following analysis, we examine how ideologies around the wet nurse's profession were articulated, developed and repeated over time. Our examination is based on the study of mainly Greek texts produced by various authors and belonging to different genres: oratory, homiletics, philosophy, hagiography, treatises and essays on the rearing and education of children, medical works and wet-nursing contracts.<sup>26</sup> These discourses tell us much more about the anxieties and preoccupations of the societies that produced them and much less about actual contemporary wet nurses. The choice for an investigation encompassing antiquity up to early Byzantium further illuminates the mechanics and dynamics of the ideologies around the wet nurse, as these are preserved or evolve over time.

## II. An ambivalent profession: wet-nursing

In Demosthenes' (384–322 BC) oration *Against Eubulides*, the speaker Euxitheus appeals the decision of the members of his deme (Halimous) to deny him the rights of citizenship and reduce him to the status of resident alien.<sup>27</sup> The speech was delivered in 345/4 BC and addressed to the Heliastic court in Athens. In order to prove his Attic descent,<sup>28</sup> Euxitheus needs to address Eubulides' accusations regarding both his father and mother. Concerning

<sup>24</sup> For the meanings of motherhood in the case of the wet nurse, see Coles (2015); Thorley (2015).

<sup>25</sup> For the wet nurse's position in Graeco-Roman contracts, see Hermann (1959); Bradley (1980); Ratzan (2015) 187–208; Parca (2017).

<sup>26</sup> *τίτθη/τιτθή, τιτθῆνη/τιθηνή/τιθηνός* and *τροφός* are the most common terms for wet nurses in our body of evidence. We should note, however, that the latter (*τροφός*) may be subject to a certain ambiguity, designating in different contexts either a wet or a dry nurse. The verb *τρέφω*, meaning 'cause to grow or increase, bring up, rear, especially of children bred and brought up in a house' (LSJ s.v. *τρέφω*), relates to the notion of nurture in a wider sense and secondarily to the particular sense of breastfeeding. For uncertainties in the exact meaning of the Latin term *nutrix* (wet or dry nurse), with wet-nursing being the primary meaning of the term in this case (the analogue to the Greek *titthē* or *titthēne/titthēnos*), see Beaucamp (1982) 550; Bradley (1986) 222 n.6, (1991) 30 n.2; Dasen (2010b) 700–01. For similar ambiguities in the Egyptian terminology concerning wet nurses (*ménat* was used for wet nurses, mothers, priestesses or mother goddesses), see Spieser (2012) 21, 35. Less frequent terms for the lactating woman in our sources, include *τιτθευτρία* (*tittheutria*) and the aforementioned *θηλάστρια* (*thēlastría*).

<sup>27</sup> Euxitheus' case arises from a *diapsēphisis* (a purging of the deme lists) dated to 346/5 BC (see Aeschin. 1.77, 86; Plut. *Vit. Per.* 37.4). The procedure and penalties relevant to his case are known from internal evidence (Dem. 57.7–14); Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 42 and Lib. *Hypotheses* 27. For the context of the speech see, for instance, Bers (2002), (2003) 107–08. For other studies discussing Dem. 57, see, for example, Lacey (1980); Victor (2002); Vlassopoulos (2016) 429–39.

<sup>28</sup> According to Attic law, only inhabitants of pure Attic descent through both parents were considered citizens of Athens. A law of Solon on this effect is cited in this oration, and we are told that it was re-enacted in 403 BC (Dem. 7.31–32). Eubulides, the man responsible for Euxitheus' expulsion in the first place, acts as the prosecutor, representing the deme along with other four elected deme officers. He is known from an inscription to have served as a member of the Council in the same year that the *diapsēphisis* was enacted.

his mother Nicarete in particular, who was forced to work as a wet nurse (of a child named Cleinias) and as a ribbon seller in the market,<sup>29</sup> Euxitheus says:

ἐπεὶ κάκεῖνο περὶ τῆς μητρὸς εἶρηκεν, ὅτι ἐτίθουσεν. ἡμεῖς δέ, ὅθ' ἡ πόλις ἠτύχει καὶ πάντες κακῶς ἔπραττον, οὐκ ἀρνούμεθα τοῦτο γενέσθαι· ὃν δὲ τρόπον καὶ ὧν ἔνεκ' ἐτίθουσεν, ἐγὼ σαφῶς ὑμῖν ἐπιδείξω. μηδεὶς δ' ὑμῶν, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, δυσχερῶς ὑπολάβη· καὶ γὰρ νῦν ἀστὰς γυναῖκας πολλὰς εὐρήσετε τιτθεούσας, ἅς ὑμῖν καὶ κατ' ὄνομα, ἐὰν βούλησθε, ἐροῦμεν. εἰ δέ γε πλούσιοι ἦμεν, οὔτ' ἂν τὰς ταινίας ἐπωλοῦμεν οὔτ' ἂν ὄλωσ ἦμεν ἄποροι. ἀλλὰ τί ταῦτα κοινωνεῖ τῷ γένει; (Dem. 57.35)

He has said this too about my mother, that she served as a wet nurse. We, on our part, do not deny that this was the case in the time of the city's misfortune, when all people were badly off; but in what manner and for what reasons she became a wet nurse I will tell you plainly. And let no one of you, men of Athens, *be prejudiced* against us because of this; for you will find today many Athenian women who are serving as wet nurses; I will mention them by name, if you wish. If we were rich we should not be selling ribbons nor be in want in any way. But what has this to do with our descent?<sup>30</sup>

Euxitheus' language and rhetoric, here and later in the speech, underline the social stigma of the wet nurse that is acknowledged by the speaker himself. Here taking up a defensive position, Euxitheus asks the members of the Heliastic court not to be 'prejudiced against' him because his mother once worked as a wet nurse. Elsewhere he uses expressions such as 'the wet nurse is a lowly thing' (ταπεινὸν ἢ τιτθῆ, Dem. 57.45),<sup>31</sup> and labels her occupation as one of the 'servile acts' which 'free men are compelled by poverty to perform' (πολλὰ δουλικά πράγματα τοὺς ἐλευθέρους ἢ πενία βιάζεται ποιεῖν, Dem. 57.45).<sup>32</sup> Nicarete's work as wet nurse is seen as the key reason for her family's defamation: 'for it was from this wet-nursing that all the slander about us has arisen' (ἀπὸ γὰρ ταύτης τῆς τιτθείας ἅπασ' ἢ περὶ ἡμᾶς γέγονεν βλασφημία, Dem. 57.42).<sup>33</sup> Yet poverty at a time of general misfortune is foregrounded as the cause for Nicarete's recourse to an occupation that is reserved for slave and non-citizen women:

μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα χρόνῳ ὕστερον παιδίων αὐτῆ δυοῖν ἤδη γεγενημένων, καὶ τοῦ μὲν πατρὸς στρατευομένου καὶ ἀποδημοῦντος μετὰ Θρασυβούλου, αὐτῆ δ' οὔσ' ἐν ἀπορίαις ἠναγκάσθη τὸν Κλεινίαν τὸν τοῦ Κλειδίκου τιτθεῦσαι. (Dem. 57.42)

<sup>29</sup> The allegation of ribbon selling is easily refuted by Solon by reference to the law forbidding slander of people working in the *agora* (Dem. 57.31–34). Wet-nursing, on the other hand, is more difficult to prove as an occupation of free Athenian women. Concerning the usual slave status of wet nurses, see Dem. 47.55–59, where there is mention of an old wet nurse who was set free by the speaker's father, but she was still offering her services to his family. On the old wet nurse's portrayal in Dem. 47, see Rubinstein (2014). The treatment of slave wet nurses in ancient Athens is discussed in Golden (1990) 146–49. Regarding female occupations in classical Athens, including wet nurses and ribbon sellers, see Rühfel (1988); Brock (1994); Bäbler (1998) 37–43; Kosmopoulou (2001); Taylor (2017) 133–47. On wet nurses and other female professions in Roman times and Byzantium, see, for example, Treggiari (1976); Kampen (1981); Beaucamp (1982); Eichenauer (1988); Schulze (1998); Ray (2004); Nikolaou (2005) 285–302; Meyer (2009) 116–225.

<sup>30</sup> Greek text: Rennie (1931); tr. Murray (1939) 257, with slight modifications; emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 265.

<sup>32</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 265.

<sup>33</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 263, with a slight modification.



Some time after this, when by now two children had been born to her, she was compelled at a time when my father was absent on military service with Thrasybulus and she herself was in hard straits, to take Cleinias, the son of Cleidicus, to nurse.<sup>34</sup>

In such dire circumstances, Nicarete undertook a risky decision: ‘This act of hers was, Heaven knows, none too fortunate with reference to the danger which has now come upon me’ (εἰς ἔμ’ ἤκοντι κινδύνῳ νῦν μὰ τὸν Δι’ οὐχὶ συμφέρον πρᾶγμα ποιήσασα, Dem. 57.42).<sup>35</sup> By taking a slave’s or foreigner’s job, Nicarete compromised her citizen status which is now called into question by her son’s enemies. It was, however, ‘both necessary and fitting, in view of the poverty she had to cope with’ (τῇ μέντοι ὑπαρχούσῃ πενίᾳ ἴσως καὶ ἀναγκαῖα καὶ ἀρμόττοντα ποιοῦσα, Dem. 57.42–43).<sup>36</sup> As these quotations attest, Euxitheus’ stance towards his mother is quite ambiguous: while he holds her responsible for his present situation, he recognizes that her work as a wet nurse was a choice made of necessity, for it had secured the family’s and, of course, his own survival.

Demosthenes’ oration reveals the ambivalence of the ancient Greek conception of wet-nursing. On the one hand, the occupation comes across as both a legitimate and effective survival strategy for free women living in poverty; according to Euxitheus, many Athenian citizens work as wet nurses (ἀστὰς γυναικας πολλὰς εὐρήσετε τιθεουσάσας, Dem. 57.35). Furthermore, the wet nurse performs an important supporting role in the structure of the ancient family by securing the survival of both the nursling and her own family, and by establishing bonds and protection beyond kin relations. Having nursed Cleinias, Nicarete is attached to him and to members of his family who act as witnesses in defence of her citizen status (Dem. 57.44–45).<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the wet nurse’s practice is also marked as an occupation of low socio-economic status and conditions (the woman’s vulnerability in the face of poverty and in the absence of her husband: Dem. 57.42), and jeopardizes one’s legal status (Eubulides’ rhetoric, using Nicarete’s occupation as argument, achieved Euxitheus’ expulsion from Athens’ citizen registers). In other words, the wet nurse’s profession is acceptable as long as it serves the needs of elite families and allows the survival of their poor counterparts. It has negative social consequences for its practitioners and their families, however, who are stigmatized and might even be deprived of their citizen rights.

Dio Chrysostom’s seventh oration, known as *Euboikos*, composed some centuries later, testifies to similar tensions surrounding the practice of wet-nursing for the poorer strata of Roman society.<sup>38</sup> When discussing the difficulties and social evils encountered by the poor in the cities, Dio divides professions for free citizens of low status into two main categories, one positive, the other negative. The negative:

ὄσαι μὲν σώματι βλαβεραὶ πρὸς ὑγίειαν ἢ πρὸς ἰσχὺν τὴν ἱκανὴν δι’ ἀργίαν τε καὶ ἐδραιότητα ἢ ψυχῇ ἀσχημοσύνην τε καὶ ἀνελευθερίαν ἐντίκουσαι ἢ ἄλλως ἀχρεῖοι καὶ πρὸς οὐδὲν ὄφελός εἰσιν εὐρημέναι δι’ ἀβελτερίαν τε καὶ τρυφήν τῶν πόλεων.  
(Or. 7.110)

<sup>34</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 263.

<sup>35</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 263.

<sup>36</sup> Tr. Murray (1939) 263. The economic activity and status of Nicarete are discussed in Cohen (1998) 58–61.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor (2017) 135–40, juxtaposing Euxitheus’ speech with other sources (primarily material evidence), also succinctly points to the ambivalent evaluation of wet-nursing as both a servile and valued occupation in the Athenian mindset of his age.

<sup>38</sup> For the identification of *Oration 7* as a mature work of Dio Chrysostom (dated around AD 96 or later), see Jones (1978) 135. For Rome as the most probable venue for the delivery of the speech, see von Arnim (1898) 457. *Euboikos* is also considered in Brunt (1973); Russell (1992) 8–13, 109–58; Ma (2000); Urbán (2004); Milazzo (2016); Jackson (2017) 220–22; Bryen (2019).

All of which are injurious to the body by impairing its health or by preventing the maintenance of its adequate strength through their inactive or sedentary character, or those that engender in the soul either turpitude or illiberality or, in general, those that are useless and good for nothing due to depravity and the silly luxury of the cities.<sup>39</sup>

The positive:

ὄσα δὲ αὖ μήτε ἀπρεπῆ τοῖς μετιοῦσι μοχθηρίαν τε μηδεμίαν ἐμποιοῦντα τῇ ψυχῇ μήτε νοσώδη τῶν τε ἄλλων νοσημάτων καὶ δῆτα ἀσθενείας τε καὶ ὄκνου καὶ μαλακίας διὰ πολλὴν ἡσυχίαν ἐγγιγνομένης ἐν τῷ σώματι, καὶ μὴν χρεῖαν γε ἰκανὴν παρέχοντα πρὸς τὸν βίον, πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα πράττοντες προθύμως καὶ φιλοπόνως οὔ ποτ' ἂν ἐνδεεῖς ἔργου καὶ βίου γίνοντο. (Or. 7.112–13)

But, on the other hand, where the occupations are not unbecoming to those who follow them and create no evil condition in their souls nor injure their health by inducing, among other diseases, physical weakness in particular, sluggishness, and softness on account of the almost complete lack of exercise, and, further, enable one to make a satisfactory living.<sup>40</sup>

Wet-nursing is part of the second group of employment that is acceptable and profitable in terms of morality, health and economic rewards for the poor worker (while occupations such as acting, dancing, playing instruments in theatres, auctioning, proclaiming rewards for arrests, acting as a lawyer, brothel keeping and prostitution are relegated to the category of the 'bad' occupations). In fact, the criteria of job classification in Dio's system are presented from the elite man's point of view, which turns a blind eye to the exploitation of the poor worker by the wealthy employer. As far as the case of the wet nurse is concerned, the moral criterion, for instance, is partly applied. Dio does not see any injustice in the wet nurse's own infant being deprived of the maternal milk and care which are essential for its survival. As suggested in the previous section, the fate of the wet nurse's offspring and her feelings for her deceased or abandoned child are no concern of the institution of motherhood that is supported by our elite authors.

In *Euboikos*, wet-nursing is third in the list of constructive employment commonly undertaken by women (after domestic servant and grape picker: Dio Chrys. Or. 7.114). However, there follows a warning to pay no heed to those idle objectors who often sneer at a man's or his parents' occupations.<sup>41</sup>

ἂν τινος ἔριθος ἢ μήτηρ ἢ τρυγήτρια ἐξελθοῦσά ποτε ἢ μισθοῦ τιτθεύσῃ παῖδα τῶν ὀρφανῶν ἢ πλουσιῶν ἢ ὁ πατήρ διδάξῃ γράμματα ἢ παιδαγωγίῃ· μηδὲν οὖν τοιοῦτον αἰσχυνομένους ὁμόσε ἰέναι. οὐ γὰρ ἄλλως αὐτὰ ἐροῦσιν, ἂν λέγωσιν, ἢ ὡς σημεῖα πενίας, πενίαν αὐτὴν λοιδοροῦντες δῆλον ὅτι καὶ προφέροντες ὡς κακὸν δὴ τι καὶ δυστυχές, οὐ τῶν ἔργων οὐδέν. (Dio Chrys. Or. 7.114–15)

<sup>39</sup> Greek text: von Arnim (1893); tr. Cohoon (1932) 347, 349, with slight modifications.

<sup>40</sup> Tr. Cohoon (1932) 349.

<sup>41</sup> Russell (1992) 142–43, arguing for a direct allusion to Dem. 57 at this point, dismisses the historical value of Dio's list: 'this whole list is of literary origin, and should not be taken seriously as a statement of contemporary social facts'. This is a rather arbitrary dismissal. Potential literary allusion, even if we assume it is grasped as such by Dio's readers, does not preclude the list's resonance of contemporary historical reality. For *Euboikos* as a speech firmly anchored in Dio's world and reflecting his social concerns, see Jones (1978) 56–64. For Demosthenes' influence on later authors including Dio, see Gibson (1999); Pernot (2006); Kremmydas (2007).



[W]hen, for instance, one's mother was once on occasion someone's hired servant or a harvester of grapes, or was a paid wet-nurse for a motherless child or a rich man's, or when his father was a schoolmaster or a tutor, let them, I say, *feel no shame* before such persons but go right ahead. For if they refer to such things, they will simply be mentioning them as indications of poverty, evidently abusing and holding up poverty itself as something evil and unfortunate, and not any of these occupations.<sup>42</sup>

Dio's caveat against the potential slander of the occupation betrays anxieties similar to those found in Demosthenes' text. Even if wet-nursing is presented here as a respectable form of paid labour for a woman of low status (among those Dio urges one to undertake 'without hesitation': ποῖα θαρροῦντας ἐπιχειρεῖν κελεύομεν, *Or.* 7.114),<sup>43</sup> it carries within it the risk of social defamation and denigration. Likewise, Dio's oration testifies once more to a tight link between low socio-economic standing and physical labour (*cf.* the dire necessity of Euxitheus' family leading to wet-nursing and selling ribbons). He puts particular emphasis on how the need to 'work with one's hands' (αὐτουργεῖν, *Or.* 7.103) and one's body results from inferior social status and complete lack of means (μηδὲν ἄλλο κτῆμα ἔξω τοῦ σώματος κεκτημένους, '[men] who have no other possession than their own bodies', *Or.* 7.106).<sup>44</sup> Once again, the social needs that wet-nursing fulfils are clearly acknowledged, yet the profession's shameful aspects are equally highlighted.

Two or three centuries later, another orator known as Chrysostom, the renowned Cappadocian Father and Archbishop John of Constantinople (AD 349–407), reflects the general negative attitude towards wet nurses, which, as we have seen, Demosthenes and Dio both endorse and contest. He writes, for example, in his seventh homily to Paul's 1 Corinthians (7.18):

Οὐδὲ φρονίμους ἔπεισαν μόνον, οὕτω θαυμαστὸν ἦν τὸ γεγονός· ἐπειδὴ δὲ οἰκέτας καὶ τίτθας καὶ εὐνούχους εἰς τοσοῦτον ἤγαγον φιλοσοφίας, ὡς ἀγγέλοις ἐφαιμίλλους ποιῆσαι, μεγίστην τῆς θείας ἐμπνοίας παρεῖχον ἀπόδειξιν. Καὶ γὰρ εἰ μὲν εὐτελεῖ τινα ἐπέταττον, εἶχεν λόγον ἴσως τὸ τὴν τούτων πειθῶ ... προβάλλεσθαι.

For if they [the Apostles] had persuaded wise men only, this deed would not have been so marvellous; but in advancing slaves and wet nurses and eunuchs unto such degree of *philosophy* as to make them equal to angels, they offered the greatest proof of their divine inspiration. For in fact, if they [slaves, wet nurses and eunuchs] performed low tasks, it was reasonable perhaps to bring forward the conviction ... wrought in these persons.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to Dio of Prusa, John Chrysostom does not mention wet-nursing in relation to other professions, but he treats its practitioners as members of a separate and base social group, such as slaves and eunuchs, who were seen by his contemporaries as also morally inferior.<sup>46</sup> In the eyes of John's contemporaries, as for those of Demosthenes and Dio, wet-nursing is 'a menial task, the last resort of poor, enslaved and freed women, who sold the fruit of their bodies to sustain the growing elite class'.<sup>47</sup> The inclusion of wet nurses, along with other lesser social categories, in the Christian vocation and their subsequent spiritual

<sup>42</sup> Tr. Cohoon (1932) 351, with slight modifications; emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Tr. Cohoon (1932) 351.

<sup>44</sup> Tr. Cohoon (1932) 345.

<sup>45</sup> Greek text: Field (1854–1862) 2.1–55, emphasis Field's; tr. Chambers (2017) 48, with modifications.

<sup>46</sup> For views about the immorality and social vices of slaves, see Nathan (2000) 36, 150, 177–82; Glancy (2002); Harrill (2003); Harper (2011) 254–61; de Wet (2015) 29–34, 170. On eunuchs, see Kuefler (2001) 19–36; Ringrose (2003) 1–29; Tougher (2008) 34–35.

<sup>47</sup> De Wet (2015) 128.

advancement constitute for John admirable and miraculous deeds which only the Apostles could achieve.

Here John Chrysostom repeats the negative stereotypes concerning wet nurses, slaves and eunuchs in an attempt to glorify the Apostles who, being fishermen, were among the most illiterate, as he emphatically points out (οἱ ἀλιεῖς, τὸ πάντων ἀμαθέστατον γένος, *Hom. 1 Cor. 7.18*), managed to initiate the most worthless and ignorant people into ‘such doctrines that neither Plato nor his followers could fathom in any way’ (τοιαῦτα δόγματα, οἷα Πλάτων καὶ οἱ κατ’ ἐκεῖνον οὐκ ἴσχυσαν ἐννοῆσαι ὅλως, *Hom. 1 Cor. 7.18*).<sup>48</sup> Yet, if such socially inferior people (slaves, wet nurses and eunuchs) could reach the angels’ state, Christians from the higher echelons of society should rid themselves of their biases: instead of avoiding and fearing those who are socially dishonourable, they should despise and fear those who through their conduct appear shameful before God. As for wet-nursing, John, like Euxitheus in Demosthenes’ oration, adopts an ambiguous stance: it could be both a negative and a positive profession, depending on the practitioner’s religion. Socially inferior, and thus denigrated, is the non-Christian wet nurse. The Christian wet nurse, on the other hand, is exalted by God; she is seen as a good wet nurse raising children in the faith, and as such she should be highly esteemed.

Despite the fact that Demosthenes, Dio and John are separated in time and lived in completely different cultures (classical Greek, Roman and early Byzantine), they appear to reflect similar social stereotypes and comparably contradictory attitudes to the profession and practice of wet-nursing. Even though it is crucial for the survival and development of the nursling, free or slave, that belongs to the master’s household, and also for the wet nurse who finds herself in desperate poverty, wet-nursing is treated as a servile and shameful profession and practice. It must be pointed out, however, that any negative attitudes towards wet-nursing in our sources do not concern the employment of wet nurses when the nursling’s mother is unable to breastfeed or is absent due to divorce or death. Strong criticism of wet-nursing appears when it is chosen over breastfeeding by a mother who is available but resorts to a wet nurse instead.

But why does the wet nurse receive both slander and honours, the latter being most eloquently expressed in epitaphs and inscriptions dedicated to deceased wet nurses?<sup>49</sup> It may be easier to understand why wet nurses were honoured by their former nurslings and their families, since emotional attachments between the two parties were likely to develop.<sup>50</sup> As shown by the case of Nicarete, who received the support of Cleinia and his relatives (*Dem. 57.44.5–7*), families often became close to, respected and supported the surrogate mothers to whom they entrusted their children. Furthermore, as the practice *par excellence* of ‘preservative love’, mothering is by definition ‘emotionally laden’,<sup>51</sup> binding the person who acts as mother with the child she looks after. In Ruddick’s words, ‘in protecting a child, a mother is besieged by feeling, her own and her children’s ... feelings demand reflection, which is in turn tested by action, which is in turn tested by the feelings it provokes’.<sup>52</sup>

The emotional connection between wet nurses and nurslings is often anticipated and illustrated in our sources. The philosopher Maximus of Tyre (second century AD),<sup>53</sup> for example, writes in his 14th discourse (*Dialexis*): ‘Mothers and nurses love their babies and try to please them as they look after them, and you are not going to deprive them of their

<sup>48</sup> Tr. Chambers (2017) 48, with modifications.

<sup>49</sup> See Bradley (1986); Joshel (1986) 14–22; Dixon (1988) 141–67.

<sup>50</sup> For discussions of the bonds between wet nurses and nurslings in the Roman period, see also Bradley (1994); Laes (2011) 72–77.

<sup>51</sup> Ruddick (1995) 71.

<sup>52</sup> Ruddick (1995) 69–70.

<sup>53</sup> For Maximus, his cultural milieu and his work, see Szarmach (1985); Trapp (1997) xi–xciv; Lauwers (2015).

claims to love because of the pleasure they try to give' (καὶ αἱ μητέρες καὶ αἱ τιτθαὶ φιλοῦσιν τὰ βρέφη καὶ πρὸς ἡδονὴν αὐτὰ θεραπεύουσιν, καὶ οὐκ ἀφαιρήσεις αὐτῶν τὸ φιλεῖν διὰ τὴν ἡδονήν, 14.5.5–8).<sup>54</sup> Maximus' reference to wet nurses' genuine love, associated with the pleasure they offer to their nurslings, which is mentioned here to make a point about how to distinguish true from false love (the first characterizing real friends, the second exhibited by flatterers), is transformed into an illustrative anecdote in his 21st discourse, which deals with Socratic love. Interestingly, Maximus chooses to refer to motherly feelings and actions in his discussions of emotions, and particularly love, thus showing an understanding of mothering similar to that of Ruddick:

Τοιαύτην φασὶ καὶ τὸν Ἀνακρέοντα ἐκεῖνον τὸν Τήϊον ποιητὴν δοῦναι δίκην τῷ ἔρωτι. ἐν τῇ τῶν Ἴωνων ἀγορᾷ, ἐν Πα<νιω>νίῳ, ἐκόμιζεν τιτθὴ βρέφος. ὁ δὲ Ἀνακρέων βαδίζων, μεθύων, ἄδων, ἐστεφανωμένος, σφαλλόμενος, ὡθεῖ τὴν τιτθὴν σὺν τῷ βρέφει καὶ τι καὶ εἰς τὸ παιδίον ἀπέρριψεν βλάσφημον ἔπος. ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἄλλο μὲν οὐδὲν ἐχαλέπηεν τῷ Ἀνακρέωντι, ἐπέυξατο δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον ὑβριστὴν ἄνθρωπον τοσαῦτα καὶ ἔτι πλείω ἐπαινέσαι ποτὲ τὸ παιδίον, ὅσα νῦν ἐπηράσατο. τελεῖ ταῦτα ὁ θεός· τὸ γὰρ παιδίον ἐκεῖνο δὴ αὐξηθὲν γίγνεται Κλεόβουλος ὁ ὠραιότατος, καὶ ἀντὶ μιᾶς ἀρᾶς ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἀνακρέων Κλεοβούλῳ δίκην δι' ἐπαίνων πολλῶν. (Max. *Dial.* 21.2.1–12)

They say that the famous Teian poet Anacreon was similarly punished by Love. At a gathering of the Ionians in the Panionion, a nurse was carrying a baby. Anacreon, as he lurched along, drunk, garlanded, and singing, bumped into the nurse and the baby, and to add insult to injury, swore at the child in the bargain. The woman voiced no anger against Anacreon, except to pray that this same insolent man would one day praise the child as lavishly as he had then cursed him, or even more so. The god answered her prayer. That child grew up to become Cleobulus, fairest of the fair, and Anacreon made reparation to Cleobulus for one small curse with many words of praise.<sup>55</sup>

Maximus provides this anecdote to explain how a poet preoccupied with the theme of love, such as Anacreon, should make up for his 'sin' to the god Eros (τὸ πλημμέλημα, ὅπερ καὶ ἀναμαχέσασθαι δεῖν, *Dial.* 21.1.9–10).<sup>56</sup> Yet, apart from Anacreon's love for the fair Cleobulus, the anecdote talks about the love and affection of the woman who raised him. The anonymous wet nurse, a good-tempered woman,<sup>57</sup> is so affected by the drunken Anacreon's unexpected attack and insults against her beloved nursling that she fervently prays for the poet's future rehabilitation, which involves his 'erasing of [the] one account (insult) with another (praise), [the] bad with [a] good one' (λόγον λόγῳ, πονηρὸν χρηστῶ ... ἐξαλείψας, 21.1.14–15). Through his poetry, therefore, Anacreon counters a 'small curse with many words of praise' (ἀντὶ μιᾶς ἀρᾶς ἔδωκεν ὁ Ἀνακρέων Κλεοβούλῳ δίκην δι' ἐπαίνων πολλῶν, 21.2.11–12),<sup>58</sup> and in so doing he 'placates so stern a divinity' (ἐξευμενιῆσθαι ἀδέκαστον δαίμονα, 21.1.11–12).<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Anacreon performs a further deed that is not highlighted by Maximus, whose focus is on the poet's debt to Eros:

<sup>54</sup> Greek text: Trapp (1994); tr. Trapp (1997) 128.

<sup>55</sup> Greek text: Trapp (1994); tr. Trapp (1997) 181.

<sup>56</sup> Trapp (1997) 181.

<sup>57</sup> Maximus' emphatic description of the wet nurse as good-tempered is not coincidental, as it was believed that an irascible wet nurse would raise a child with a similar bad character. See Bradley (1986) 214–15; Tite (2009) 381–86; Dasen (2010a) 308.

<sup>58</sup> Trapp (1997) 181.

<sup>59</sup> Trapp (1997) 181.

he fulfils the wish of the affectionate wet nurse who takes pride in raising a fair and praiseworthy boy.

Another caring wet nurse also resorts to prayer in a Christian text of the fifth century, the anonymous *Miracle Collection of Thekla*. The collection's 24th miracle story concerns a little boy from the ancient city of Olba who, due to excessive weeping, is about to lose one of his eyes. After realizing that no doctor can solve the problem, the worried wet nurse undertakes further actions. She takes the boy to the saint's shrine in Seleukia where, as the hagiographer remarks:

ἀεὶ μετ' ὄδυρμῶν καὶ λιτῶν καὶ δακρῦων προκομίζουσα τὸ παιδίον τῇ μάρτυρι, καὶ τὸ τραῦμα τοῦτο ἐπίδεικνύουσα, καὶ δεομένη μὴ παριδεῖν τὸ παιδίον εἰς οὕτως ἀκαλλές τε καὶ ἀπρεπές καὶ ἐπονείδιστον πρᾶγμα καὶ σχῆμα καθιστάμενον, καὶ τὴν μάλιστα τῆς ὄψεως ἀπολλύον χάριν. (*Miracles of Thekla* 24.6–10)

She presented the child to the martyr with incessant lamentations, prayers and tears, pointing to this injury, and imploring the martyr not to disregard a child thus doomed to an unbecoming, ill-suited and disgraceful state and appearance, who was about to lose the gift of sight.<sup>60</sup>

This passage graphically illustrates the wet nurse's strong emotional involvement in the child's serious health problem. Her continuous mourning, tears, vigils and prayers are the strongest manifestations of her pain, which appears even greater than that of the suffering boy. She suffers both for the child's ailment and the unpleasant sight of his near-blind eye. Like the wet nurse in Maximus' text, she is concerned not only for the child's present state, but also for his future appearance and social acceptance. As for the latter, the wet nurse in the first example prays that Cleobulus will become such an attractive young man that even his present abuser will become one of his most enthusiastic admirers. In the second example, the wet nurse prays for the restoration of the boy's appearance to avoid contempt and social isolation.

Both wet nurses exemplify Ruddick's definition of mothering as beset with emotions leading to reflection (they have the right thought of turning to the divine as the sole power able to restore their children's state and ensure an honourable future), which is confirmed by action (their communication with the divine through prayer; the second wet nurse even travels to another city, Seleukia, where Thekla's shrine is located). Their action, in turn, is verified by the emotions performed during the prayer and their wholehearted devotion to its successful outcome, as well as by their happiness when their prayers are answered. Because they behave as loving and caring mothers, the two wet nurses earn, on the one hand, the children's and their families' love and respect, and on the other, the appreciation of the authors who include them in their texts.<sup>61</sup> Evidently, the two women, whose names our authors do not even consider worth mentioning, belong to the category of the 'good' wet nurse as defined by the ancient and early Byzantine institution of motherhood, that is 'a single-minded person; when she thinks and feels, she thinks and feels exclusively out of love and duty to her charge'.<sup>62</sup> By conforming to the 'good' wet nurse trope, as Rich would have it, both wet nurses enforce social rules, values and expectations concerning the work of mothering.

But what is it that leads many other ancient and Byzantine authors, including John Chrysostom, who both approves and disapproves of wet-nursing, to condemn wet

<sup>60</sup> Greek text: Dagron (1978); tr. Johnson in Talbot and Johnson (2012) 95, with slight modifications.

<sup>61</sup> On the affectionate wet nurse in Graeco-Roman culture, see Glancy (2002) 19–21; Laes (2017) 65–66.

<sup>62</sup> Joshel (1986) 9.

nurses?<sup>63</sup> Why are wet nurses so often treated as shameful? In her important article on disgraceful professions in ancient Rome, ‘Unspeakable professions: public performance and prostitution in ancient Rome’, Catherine Edwards argues convincingly that persons engaged in occupations such as public entertainment, acting and prostitution were tainted with *infamia* because they ‘lived by providing sex, violence, and laughter for the pleasure of the public—a licentious affront to Roman *gravitas*’; they ‘were the objects of other people’s desires’; they ‘served the pleasure of others’ and ‘were tarnished by exposure to the public gaze’.<sup>64</sup>

Gladiators, actors and prostitutes were also associated with slaves not just because slaves too performed such ill-reputed occupations for their masters’ profit, but because, like slaves, these disreputable professionals were considered irresponsible and untrustworthy, and were subject to bodily punishment. ‘What made the infamous like slaves’, Edwards goes on, ‘was that they too served the pleasures of others, they too had no dignity, their bodies too were bought and sold’.<sup>65</sup> Edwards mentions that other professions were stigmatized in moral terms though they were not related to public performances and prostitution, but she does not include wet-nursing among them.<sup>66</sup> Some of these other shameful occupations are listed by Dio in his *Euboikos* discussed above (for example auctioning, proclaiming rewards for arrests, acting as lawyer).

Yet, in contrast to the latter dishonourable professions and as is the cases of the actor, gladiator and prostitute, the wet nurse put her body at the service of others. Both her breast milk and bodywork satisfied the needs, desires and pleasures of other people’s children or slaves. If she failed to provide the required mothering services or if something happened to her nursling, she would also be subject to corporal punishment. Additionally, she ‘too had no dignity’, since her maternal body ‘was bought and sold’, and therefore it did not belong to her, but to its buyer(s). Like the prostitute, the wet nurse commercialized parts of her body that are integral to the female self.<sup>67</sup> In so doing, she also acquired a monetary worth that devalued her humanity as a woman, leading to her defamation. For all these reasons, the wet nurse was also judged as unreliable and careless. For example, the stereotype of the (wet) nurse who ate the child’s food was common from antiquity to Byzantium.<sup>68</sup> In his *On the Causes of Diseases*, the influential physician Galen (AD 129–ca.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Tacitus’ (ca. AD 56–120) *Dialogue on Oratory* 28.4–29.1; ed. Mayer (2001); Favorinus’ (AD 80–150) words in Aulus Gellius’ (ca. AD 123–170) *Attic Nights* 12.1; ed. in Rolfe (1946); Pseudo-Plutarch’s *Education of Children* 3C.5.1–11; ed. Babbitt (1927); John Chrysostom, *Homily 82 on Matthew*, PG 58.744, 5–7. For discussions on authors promoting maternal nursing and condemning wet-nursing, see Étienne (1973) 36–37; Joshel (1986) 7–9, 21; Dixon (1988) 120–29; Abou Aly (1996) 87–88; Corbier (1999) 1259–60, 1274–77; Ray (2004) 369–71; Dasen (2010a) 308, (2010b) 701–03, (2012b) 53–57; Parkin (2013) 50–57; Bretin-Chabrol (2015) 25–27.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards (1997) 67–68.

<sup>65</sup> Edwards (1997) 76.

<sup>66</sup> Edwards (1997) 76.

<sup>67</sup> For the association of the wet nurse with the prostitute based on evidence from the Roman Imperial period, see Pedrucci (2020e).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the words of the Sausage Seller in Aristophanes’ *Knights* 716–18: κᾶθ’ ὥσπερ αἱ τίτθαι γε σιτίσεις κακῶς. | μασώμενος γὰρ τῷ μὲν ὀλίγον ἐντίθης, | αὐτὸς δ’ ἐκείνου τριπλάσιον κατέσπακας (‘Yes, but you feed him like a dishonest nurse – you chew the food, / then give him a small piece, once you’ve swallowed / three times as much yourself’). Greek text: Wilson (2007); tr. Johnston in Hayes and Nimis (2017) 81. Interestingly the verse κᾶθ’ ὥσπερ αἱ τίτθαι γε σιτίσεις κακῶς is taken up and commented upon by Byzantine scholiasts of the *Knights*, who also took for granted the nurse’s wickedness. We read thus in comment 716b: ‘αὐταὶ γὰρ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι πάσας τὰς τροφὰς δι’ ὀλοκλήρου τὰ παιδία ἐσθίειν, αὐταὶ λαμβάνουσαι καὶ διαμασώμεναι, οὕτω μετὰ τὸ κατεργάσασθαι τὰ ἐδέσματα ἐξαίρουσαι τοῦ ἰδίου στόματος, ἐντιθέασιν τοῖς τῶν παιδίων. εἴτα συμβαίνει τὰς ἀγνώμονας ὀλίγα μὲν δίδοναι τοῖς παιδίοις, αὐτὰς δὲ κατεσθίειν τὰ πλεονα’ (‘These [(wet) nurses], because children cannot eat solid food on their own, take the food and pre-chew it. After preparing the food thus they take it out of their mouths and put it into those of the children. It happens, nevertheless, that the ungrateful [women] eat most of the food and give very little to the children’). Greek text: Jones and Wilson (1969). The stereotype of the wicked wet nurse who eats most of the child’s food is found also in other genres, such as philosophy. A case in

210),<sup>69</sup> to mention a second example, attributes children's bodily deformities to wet nurses' ignorance and carelessness.<sup>70</sup>

Another reason why wet nurses were not trusted is voiced in the Pseudo-Plutarchian treatise *The Education of Children* (first–second century AD) where we read: ‘the goodwill of wet and dry nurses is insincere and forced, since they love for pay’ (αἱ τίθαι δὲ καὶ αἱ τροφοὶ τὴν εὐνοίαν ὑποβολιμαίαν καὶ παρέγγραπτον ἔχουσιν, ἅτε μισθοῦ φιλοῦσαι, 3C.6–8).<sup>71</sup> According to the ideology advanced by Pseudo-Plutarch, the caring and emotional connectedness involved in child-rearing should not be commodified. Commercialized motherhood through wet and dry nursing was seen as problematic because selling intimacy compromised the nurse's mothering work and feelings, which were considered untrue and artificial, harmful to children and destructive of parent–child relationships.

### III. Conclusions

The ancient and early Byzantine wet nurse, like the slave who was the slave-holder's surrogate body,<sup>72</sup> functioned as a surrogate body for the biological mother whose family could afford to pay for mothering services. The mother who refrained from breastfeeding relied on the wet nurse's body by which her children were nourished and raised. Thus, the biological mother could achieve the following: spare herself the tiring work of breastfeeding and childminding; confirm her superior social status; continue her conjugal life; and conceive more children. At the same time, the mother could avoid getting emotionally attached to an infant that might not survive in an era of high mortality rates.<sup>73</sup>

To keep the job that secured her survival, the wet nurse had, in addition to behaving as a devoted and loving mother, to preserve her milk unspoiled.<sup>74</sup> In their attempt to ensure the best-quality milk and most suitable mothering services for their infants, elite ancient and early Byzantine families followed strict guidelines, often supported by contemporary medical, philosophical and other authorities, as well as legal documents, in choosing their newborns' wet nurses, whose work, body and way of life they supervised, controlled and regulated.<sup>75</sup> As Amal Abou Aly rightly suggests, the guidelines relative to the choice of wet nurse, her way of life and her behaviour ‘were not necessarily always followed either by the nurse or those who selected her’.<sup>76</sup> They do, nonetheless, point to serious efforts to

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point is Sextus Empiricus' (second–third century AD) *Against Mathematicians* 2.42.5–7 (ed. Mau and Mutschmann (1914)).

<sup>69</sup> The impact and uses of Galen's work in Byzantium have been examined by Bouras-Vallianatos (2019); Degni (2019); Stathakopoulos (2019); Zipsler (2019).

<sup>70</sup> Gal. *De causis morborum* VII.27K.3–4, 6–11: Μαλακὰ γὰρ ἔτι καὶ ὀλίγου δεῖν ῥυτὰ τὰ τῶν νεογνῶν παιδίων ὑπάρχοντα σώματα ῥαδίως ἐκστρέφεται ... εἴτ' αὖθις τῶν τροφῶν ἀναιρουμένων τε καὶ ἀποτιθεμένων οὐ κατὰ τρόπον ἐν τε τῷ γάλα παρέχειν καὶ ἐν τῷ λούειν καὶ σπαργανοῦν. ἐν ἅπασι γὰρ τοῖς τοιοῦτοις εἰ μὴ τις ἐπιτηδείως μεταχειρίζοιτο, ῥαδίως ἐκστρέφεται καὶ διαφθείρεται τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ἐκάστου τῶν μελῶν σχῆμα ('For being soft still, and almost fluid, the bodies of new-born infants are easily distorted ... if nurses do not pick them up and put them down in the proper manner in the providing of milk, or in washing and wrapping. For in all such instances, if someone does not handle [the infant] suitably, the natural form of each of the limbs is easily distorted and destroyed'). Greek text: Kühn (1824) 1–41; tr. Johnston (2006) 172.

<sup>71</sup> Greek text and tr. Babbitt (1927) 15, with slight modifications.

<sup>72</sup> Glancy (2002) 10, 12, 15–16, 21–24.

<sup>73</sup> Bradley (1986) 216–22; Centlivres Challet (2017) 897–98.

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of milk quality in contemporary medical treatises, see Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou (2022).

<sup>75</sup> A detailed examination of the control and regulation of wet nurses is provided in Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou (2024).

<sup>76</sup> Abou Aly (1996) 86.



control the wet nurse against whom, as the previous discussion has demonstrated, there were unfavourable prejudices.

As the wide variety of the texts studied here reveals, wet-nursing was a constant topic in some of the dominant discourses produced in the ancient and early Byzantine worlds. Wet-nursing, in fact, did not cease to be a highly discussed theme until the 20th century, when hand-feeding led to the ‘demise of the wet nurse’.<sup>77</sup> Of course, we are aware that the wide chronological and geographical span of our material imposes certain limitations. Diverse genres have been used, each governed by its own rhetorical and generic conventions at different stages of its development. Equally diverse were the regional customs and their differentiation during the evolution of the vast ancient world from the fourth century BC to early Byzantium. On the other hand, the discussion of texts produced within this time frame has brought to the fore the continuity and change of wet-nursing ideologies from ca. the fourth century BC to the fifth century AD.

Finally, we are aware that our material, written mainly, if not exclusively, by upper-class urban males, is unavoidably doubly biased. The wet nurse’s own voice is nowhere articulated. In fact, the large populations of lower-class citizens, slaves, rural populations and foreigners are hardly visible.<sup>78</sup> Gender and class: the two crucial social forces delineating the dynamics of ancient and early Byzantine wet-nursing and mothering constitute the same two filters imposing the sternest limitations on our reconstruction of practices through the study of available resources. Evidently, these resources testify to ancient and early Byzantine discursive ideologies rather than to the contemporary realities of actual wet nurses.

**Acknowledgements.** This article presents some of the results of the Cyprus-based interdisciplinary research project ‘Lactating Breasts: Motherhood and Breastfeeding in Antiquity and Byzantium’ (MotherBreast 2018–2023; <https://www.ucy.ac.cy/motherbreast/>), which brought into collaboration cultural historians of diverse expertise with medical practitioners dedicated to the breastfeeding cause.

**Funding Statement.** MotherBreast was co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the Republic of Cyprus through the Research and Innovation Foundation (project EXCELLENCE/1216/0020), as well as by the University of Cyprus. The project was developed while the authors were also implementing the project ‘Network for Medieval Arts and Rituals’ (NetMAR), which received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 951875. The opinions expressed in this article reflect only the authors’ views and in no way reflect the European Commission’s opinions. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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<sup>77</sup> Fildes (1988) 190–241. See also Fildes (1986); Maher (1992); Sperling (2013).

<sup>78</sup> Concerning the extent to which our own preconceptions about parenting, projected unconditionally onto the evidence, may act as a further distorting obstruction, see Golden (2010).

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**Cite this article:** Constantinou S and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou A (2024). The other mother: ancient and early Byzantine approaches to wet-nursing and mothering. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 144, 29–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426924000053>