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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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KATARZYNA BURZYŃSKA\*

## Wet Nurses' (In)visible Presences. Ethics of Care and Dependency Critique in Selected English Early Modern Dramas<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

Although recent scrutiny of the power dynamics in early modern birthing chambers paints a complex portrait of varied (inter)dependencies, the belief in a potentially disruptive and unruly midwife as well as a spectre of a threatening maternal influence lingers in analyses of English early modern drama. Relatively less attention is devoted to wetnurses, who, as I argue, constitute 'invisible presences' in dramas of Shakespeare's era. Wetnurses' fundamental role in infants' development is only scantily alluded to or erased. In this paper I look at wetnurses' erasures in Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, late romance *The Winter's Tale* and Middleton's city comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Inspired by Eva Feder Kittay's "dependency critique", I wish to argue that nurses in English early modern drama function similarly to modern-day "dependency workers" whose role grows out of fundamental dependency; a fact of human existence obfuscated by the cult of human individualism and self-sufficiency that has historically served only the privileged select of (white) males. Depictions of wetnurses both reflect the necessity for 'dispersed' maternal care and simultaneously unveil the failings of a care-taking system that refuses to valorise their work. If English early modern drama reflects tangible realities of early modern women's lives it also illustrates a systemic failure to accommodate for dependents; labouring women and their infants.

KEYWORDS: wet-nursing in early modern drama; dependency work; dependency critique; pregnancy and maternity in Shakespeare; pregnancy and maternity in Middleton

In her ground-breaking midwifery manual *The Midwife's Book, or The Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* (1671), Jane Sharp writes: "The usual way for rich people is to put forth their children to nurse, but that is a remedy that needs a remedy, if it might be had; because it changeth the natural disposition of the child, and oftentimes exposeth the infant to many hazards, if great care be not taken in the choice of the nurse" (1999, 259). Sharp man-

<sup>1</sup>This paper is part of a research project "Sir, she came in great with child, and longing": Phenomenology of Pregnancy in English Early Modern Drama (*Measure for Measure* 2.1.96)" funded by The National Science Centre, Poland within OPUS 14 framework (No. UMO-2017/27/B/HS2/00089).

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ages to bring together several essential aspects of wet-nursing “as a social institution”.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, she acknowledges breastfeeding as fundamental in any child’s survival and healthy development. Secondly, she lends credence to the pervasive early modern anxiety of wetnurses’ potentially perilous influence on the babies in their care and, finally, she acknowledges wet-nursing as an elitist service accessible only to the privileged. Although Sharp writes extensively about the desirable qualities wetnurses should possess, she solely focuses on the baby and its parents’ needs. Like previous male authors, Sharp’s narrative instrumentalizes and objectifies wetnurses. One is caught in a double bind; although fundamental and even potentially threatening, wet-nurses are almost solely reduced to the commodified liquid their body produces. Their health and well-being is only important as far as it serves the well-being of another family. Their necessary work and care transpires in the infants’ growth but they - as carers and nurturers - remain largely invisible.

Wetnurses’ invisibility, I argue, is part of a larger cultural blind spot regarding the clash between nascent early modern ideals of self-sufficient, independent subjectivity and inescapable dependency inscribed in homo sapiens’ mammalian existence. In the early modern period newly-emergent notions of subjectivity and budding individualism were in flux. On the one hand, pre-Harveyesque “humoral subjectivity” was “open, penetrable, fluid, and extended”, while human affective humoral make-up was believed to be shared with non-human animals (Paster 2004, 137). On the other, early modern humoralism was clearly gendered and required “the strategic containment of female appetite and reproduction and the strategic promotion of male potency” (Paster 1993, 58). Despite seemingly high regard for maternity, “the ideology of motherhood” was subservient to patriarchy and helped maintain the status quo (Crawford 2013, 5-6). Women, as both subjects and objects of reproduction, occupied an uncomfortable position; suspended between human and non-human, being often animalized and vilified for their reproductive and maternal roles.<sup>3</sup>

Early modern English drama reflects this tenuous state of knowledge on reproduction and the sex-gender system under pressure. Independent

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “wet nursing as a social institution” comes from Fildes 1986, 152.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, midwifery books maintain an ancient belief that the female womb was an animal capable of movement and intention. Both infertility and an abnormal pregnancy could be seen as punishment for sin or a consequence of female “monstrous imagination” (Huet 1993, 13-35). A healthy pregnancy is seen as a tenuous condition, bordering on disease, during which a woman is expected to avoid any “excess” that may result in a miscarriage (Rösslin and Raynalde 2009, 136-8). On the limitations placed on pregnant women, see Pollock 2013, 50-1. On the womb as an animal, see Crawford 2013, 6.

masculine identity is fashioned through the brutal severing of mother-child bonds and maternal erasure or containment.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, human babies just like other mammals can only thrive in conditions of dependency; a fact of existence either ignored or violently repressed in the drama of the period. In this paper I am interested in other, less critically scrutinized 'maternal figures'. In what follows, I investigate the role of wetnurses in three, generically different dramas; Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1593), Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* (1610) and Middleton's most acclaimed city comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (ca. 1613).

Research on early modern labour and lying-in has often underscored the exclusivity of female spaces and the central role of the midwife in paternity-naming narratives in the otherwise male-dominant culture. Labour and lying-in have been read as power reversal sites with the labouring women emerging as a "woman-on-top".<sup>5</sup> Although more recent scrutiny of the power dynamics in early modern birthing chambers paints a somewhat more complex portrait of varied (inter)dependencies, the belief in a potentially disruptive and unruly midwife as well as a spectre of threatening maternal influence lingers in analyses of English early modern drama.<sup>6</sup> In reality, in the dramas where such 'mysterious' powers are attributed to birthing communities, female characters are most vulnerable to the attacks on their bodily autonomy. Unruly, pregnant Tamora is only safe until the burden of her secret remains safely tucked in her womb. Once the baby is born neither she nor the baby are safe. The unknowability of Hermione's pregnancy mobilizes shocking injustices that befall her. Paulina, a paternity-naming midwife, can do little to protect her or the baby. Mrs Allwit may be safe only because her husband is greedy enough to be a willing cuckold, while her lover ready to pay for the upkeep of their child. Had Allwit wanted to

<sup>4</sup> Kahn argues that maternal erasure in *King Lear* demonstrates "a patriarchal conception of the family in which children owe their existence to their fathers alone" (1992, 95). Adelman investigates "a masculinity that can read in the full maternal body only the signs of its own loss" (1992, 222). Rose traces the trope of a "dead" or "dying mother" in canonical literary texts where the mother's authority grounded in paternity knowledge neither empowers or makes her secure (2017, 3, 5).

<sup>5</sup> See Zemon-Davis's classic article "Women on Top" (1975). Zemon-Davis' argumentation has inspired various historical and literary readings of the birthing ritual, in which both the midwife and the labouring woman, at least temporarily, have the upper hand over their husbands e.g. Wilson 2002, 132-4; Wilson 2013, 72-83. For more on paternity dependence on women's words and women's authority see Bicks 2000, 52; Bicks 2003, 11-21; Luttfriing 2019, 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> As Gowing argues, women's relationships in the birthing process have been "idealized" to see "birthrooms as havens of female support" and "midwives as heroines", whereas in fact women played important roles enabling the continuance of early modern patriarchy (2013, 6).

expose his unfaithful wife or Sir Walter got bored of his lover and decided to withhold funds, Mrs Allwit would have found herself in a parallel situation to the anonymous Wench who was forced to abandon her baby because of her unmarried status and penury. In each case, pregnancy and/or maternity diminish (in comedies or romances) or utterly annihilate (in tragedies) maternal figures. The care over the children left or abandoned remains a lingering, uncomfortable question.

In this sense, severance or suspension of mother-child bonds may open up some limited space for an investigation of alternative nursing and care-taking systems beyond biological mothering. Yet, in none of the plays wetnurses emerge as well-rounded characters. In *Titus*, Shakespeare collapses the role of a paternity-naming midwife, birth attendant and wetnurse into one character referred to plainly as Nurse. Although *The Winter's Tale* is steeped in maternal imagery, while pregnancy and labour constitute the play's nexus, a wetnurse is a barely visible spectre. In Middleton's city comedy, both a dry and wet nurse accompany Mrs Allwit in her sumptuous lying-in. However, both these characters are reduced to a bare minimum. In each play gestation, labour and early maternity are central to the dramas' key conflicts. If maternal presences are strategically removed, contained or mocked in these plays, care-takers like wetnurses are devalorised even further. As I argue, the fact that "pregnancy plays"<sup>7</sup> of various genres erase or minimize nurses in equal measure speaks to a wider cultural oversight of "dependency work" and "dependency workers". This cultural blind spot is a historical legacy that unfortunately lingers in modern culture that seemingly espouses equality.

Hence, my argument revolves around glaring absences of those in whose arms children spent crucial, formative early months or years of their lives.<sup>8</sup> Following, Eva Feder Kittay's "dependency critique", I wish to argue that nurses in English early modern drama function similarly to modern-day "dependency workers" whose role grows out of fundamental dependency; a fact of human existence obfuscated by the cult of human individualism and self-sufficiency that has historically served only the privileged select of (white) males. Kittay's acclaimed *Love's Labour: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* has provocatively interrogated modern liberal ideals of

<sup>7</sup> I am using Thiel's term "pregnancy play" to point to the dramas that feature a pregnant character, whose pregnancy drives the central conflict in the play (2018, 144-5).

<sup>8</sup> One exception may be the character of Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* as she is Juliet's 'alternative' mother. Still, with her talkativeness and bawdy humour she is a comic character who, in a way, contributes to the mockery of female care-givers in a similar vein to Middleton's birth attendants in the grotesque post-christening scenes. My reference to the nurse in *R&J* comes from an unpublished paper by Elizabeth Ann Mackey presented at SAA 2022.



equality as exclusive rather than inclusive and poignantly drawn attention to the necessity of including conditions of dependency in all human social projects. As Kittay argues: “the presumption of equality obscured the expense to which many of our societal interactions are not between persons symmetrically suited, even when they are between individuals who might otherwise be autonomous. Moral, political common social theories have left us with a moral, and often legal, vacuum in domains where women are likely to be at one end of the asymmetry” (2019, 19). Kittay outlines various inescapable conditions of dependency such as childhood, old age, disability, temporary incapacitation, disease etc., which require the performance of dependency work. This type of work has been historically assigned to women. It has often been unpaid or badly paid and as such has excluded many women from the competition over goods and social status. Modern equality conceptualization, as she argues, “which uses white middle class men as the measure, improves the lives of some women at the cost of a greater degree of inequality for other women” (Kittay 2019, 22). As many middle-class privileged women have the means to employ “dependency workers” to aid them in their everyday struggles in their careers, the dependency workers themselves are excluded from the ‘fruits’ of equality.

Gaard argues that in modern culture “breast milk and women’s labor are part of the gift economy that is simultaneously invisible, unmonetized, and appropriated in national and international economic systems” (2017, 94). In early modern culture wet-nursing was a recognized form of paid labour, but, still, it was “possibly demeaning” (Paster 1993, 215). Although early modern drama grows out of a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist context, Sharp’s commentary on the rich people hiring wetnurses for their children, with which I started, illustrates a parallel phenomenon to the modern treatment of “dependency workers”. Sharp talks about a purchasing power that enables to buy another woman’s bodily resources. As I argue, the employment of a wet-nurse in the early modern context further disembodies and inferiorises both privileged and less-privileged women. It serves a systemic erasure of dependency work, which in selected dramas has disastrous consequences for everyone involved. Depictions of wetnurses both reflect the necessity for ‘dispersed’ maternal care and simultaneously unveil the failings of a care-taking system that refuses to valorise their work. It is the withholding of fundamental tactile bonds that drives conflicts in the dramas. Simultaneously, these failures underscore the necessity for “tactile sociality”<sup>9</sup> necessary for stable social development. If English early modern drama indeed reflects tangible

<sup>9</sup> I am borrowing the term “tactile sociality” from Willet 1995, 31. For an insightful and multi-layered analysis of touch in the early modern context, see the collection edited by Harvey 2016a.

realities of early modern women's lives it also captures a systemic failure to accommodate for 'dependents'; labouring women and their infants.

**"I'll make you feed on berries and on roots": Nursing in *Titus Andronicus* (4.2.179)**

In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora, Queen of the Goths and Empress of Rome, gives birth to a black baby; a fruit of her extramarital affair with Aaron, the Moor, her servant and lover. Because Aaron's "seal be stamped in his face", the baby-boy is promptly sent away to his father so that he should "christen [him] with the dagger's point" (*Titus* 4.2.129 and 72). Although dictated by the necessity to survive, Tamora's attempted infanticide is an ultimate act of brutality meant to fossilize the audiences' reception of her as a monstrous and 'unnatural' mother, while Aaron's elaborate plan to save his son partly saves him from a label of an incorrigible villain without any moral qualms. Aaron's overriding of Tamora's 'maternal' authority also contributes to the reestablishment of the fathers' rule in the play where matriarchal and patriarchal family models clash.<sup>10</sup> In 4.2. at the centre of this power struggle there is a character of a nurse with the hapless baby in her arms. The nurse is introduced as Tamora's birth attendant or 'gossip', whereas in fact she functions as a paternity-naming midwife<sup>11</sup> and a messenger relying Tamora's command. As swiftly as she arrives, she is brutally murdered by Aaron who heralds his rash act as a "deed of policy" (*Titus*, 4.2.150). Getting rid of a "long-tongued, babbling gossip", he proceeds with his plan to exchange his black baby for his countryman's son who happened to be born white (*Titus*, 4.2.152). The swiftness with which Aaron acts unveils the birthing community's vulnerability as well as an uncomfortable realization that women-nurseries are easily exchangeable. Yet, the nurse's momentary presence raises numerous issues regarding the immediate care of Aaron's son.

In line with the tragedy's patriarchal orientation, the nurse in *Titus* emerges as a liminal and threatening presence. The birthing ritual seemingly follows proscribed scripts but, because of Tamora's unorthodox sexual conduct, her labour and its aftermath reverses expected codes of behaviour. In early modern rituals, once the baby was born it would be handed to the nurse

<sup>10</sup> On the questions of maternal and paternal authority in *Titus*, see Detmer-Goebel 2015, 111-15. On the clash between matriarchy and patriarchy as well as the association of Tamora with unruly "wilderness", see Carter 2010, 38; Wynne-Davies 1991, 137. On the alternative familial arrangements and the "redeeming" of Aaron, see Brown 2019, loc. 2459-515.

<sup>11</sup> On the role of midwives in confirming patriarchal paternity scripts, see Bicks 2000, 52; Bicks 2003, 33-4.

to be washed and swaddled, while the midwife would offer her full attention to the mother (Gélis 1996, 178). In *Titus*, like in other pregnancy plays, labour and lying-in are pushed off-stage, confirming the “unrepresentable” nature of pregnancy and birth in Western culture.<sup>12</sup> Aaron, Demetrius and Chiron, excluded from the birthing chamber, are shown on stage awaiting the news of the Emperor’s son, while Tamora is “in her unrest” (*Titus* 4.2.31). Possibly, because the baby is born black it is the nurse, not the midwife Cornelia, who is tasked with the delivering of the message to Aaron. Since Tamora decides that the baby must die the regular paternity-bestowing act is transferred to the nurse, clearly a less authoritative figure than the midwife. In this particular case there is also nothing to gain from this otherwise prestigious job.<sup>13</sup> This way, Shakespeare subtly signals the dubious moral standards and cowardice that Cornelia the midwife might exhibit, which align her with the stereotype of the incompetent and greedy midwife mocked in numerous early modern texts.<sup>14</sup>

The Nurse in *Titus Andronicus* is also associated with the inferiorised birthing community, accused of dishonesty and untrustworthiness.<sup>15</sup> The nurse’s loyalty lies in-between her allegiance to the labouring woman and subservience to the woman’s husband, in this case the Emperor. She decides to follow her mistress’s command. Although she follows through with Tamora’s plan, she is presented as a fearful and spineless woman, whose misgivings are dismissed by Aaron as “caterwauling” (*Titus*, 4.2.58). Jane Sharp in *The Midwife’s Book* imagines a perfect candidate for a wetnurse in the following words: “Such a woman is sociable, not subject to melancholy, not be angry of fretful; nor peevish and passionate; but jovial, and will Sing

<sup>12</sup> For more on the aesthetics of birth and the taboo on the presentation of labour in art and culture, see Brand and Granger 2012, 216, 220-5.

<sup>13</sup> In *Henry VIII* by Shakespeare and Fletcher the Old Lady, functioning as a paternity-bestowing midwife, is clearly driven by greed and her ambitions of gaining favour at court. She is visibly disgruntled by the meagre wages that she had been given by Henry.

<sup>14</sup> As I argue elsewhere: “Male fears surrounding the midwife’s incompetence or her greed find their reflection in the midwife’s oath, in which she is sworn not to abandon a poorer woman for the sake of a richer one or to deputise her tasks to a less experienced or incompetent woman” (Burzyńska 2022, 35). Evenden provides the midwife’s oath from 1713 in Appendix C (2000, 208). For the whole midwife’s oath, see Cressy 1999, 64-6. The “incompetent midwife” theme may be found in popular literature and male-authored midwifery books which dismiss the midwives’ experience. Even Culpeper’s *Directory for Midwives*, despite its otherwise ambitious goals, undermines midwives’ authority (Fissell 2004, 143).

<sup>15</sup> The nurse is referred to as a “gossip”; a term that initially used to denote a godparent. Later it became associated with women and their “unruliness and mindless chatter” (Bicks 2003, 27).

and Dance, taking great delight in children; and therefore is the most fit to Nurse them” (1999, 266-7). Shakespeare’s scant characterization of the Nurse in *Titus* makes her nothing like the woman Sharp outlines. Although she is presented on stage with the baby in her arms as is captured by Aaron’s question: “What dost thou wrap and fumble in thy arms?”, she emerges as grotesque mockery of a nurturing wetnurse (*Titus* 4.2.59).

Through her mouth the most disturbing prejudices against racialized bodies are uttered;

A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue.  
Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad  
Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime.  
(*Titus*, 4.2.68-70)

As a fruit of miscegenation, Aaron and Tamora’s baby is framed as a monster.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as LaPerle argues “Aaron mounts an inspired argument for the constancy and vigour of the black body” (2019, loc. 3047-8). Shakespeare allows a relatively minor character to express his period’s lingering anxieties revolving racial difference and miscegenation. However, by putting these words into the lips of a woman who should feel responsible for the baby’s welfare, he aligns the Nurse with the maligned, animalized and monstrous Tamora and, by extension, the whole female birthing community. Through the reversal of maternal expectations, he manages to stage an ultimate social threat; assisted maternal infanticide. It is this move that allows the villain Aaron to be partially redeemed, while Tamora to be ‘denaturalized’ and ‘animalized’.

The incidence of wet-nursing in early modern England was steadily growing, while more and more parents hired wetnurses from the poorest sections of society (Fildes 1986, 156). Badinter argues that a widespread practice of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French mothers of sending their babies to overworked and incompetent wetnurses was a masked form of infanticide (1998, 101). Wet-nursing in early modern France was prevalent across all social strata and resulted in staggering death rates among infants (Badinter 1998, 98). The withholding of nursing of one’s own baby resulted in “maternal indifference” (62-8). Sharp in her midwifery manual confirms that the early moderns were aware of the emotional bonds forming between

<sup>16</sup> Loomba (2002, loc. 664-5) famously comments on the baby: “By bringing this baby on stage, Shakespeare was doing something entirely unprecedented, but it was also a scene he never repeated. Aaron’s son is the only child of an interracial couple that we actually see on the early modern stage in England”. For more on the contentious nature of interracial relationships, see Loomba 1989, 52; Loomba 2002, loc. 547-9. For more on the fears of miscegenation in the period, see Royster 2000, 432 and 449.

a nursing mother and her baby: "for doubtless the mothers milk is commonly best agreeing with the child; and if the mother do not nurse her own Child, it is a question whether she will ever love it so well as she doth that proves the Nurse to it as well as Mother: and without doubt the child will be much alienated in his affections by sucking of strange Milk, and that may be one great cause of Childrens proving so undutiful to their parents" (1999, 265). In *Titus*, Tamora promptly sends her baby away, preventing any maternal feelings to be stirred. Hence, Shakespeare paints an extreme portrait of an infanticidal mother who is assisted in her project by a nurse whose primary concern should be to nurse and nurture the baby and not assist in its death. Once the nurse's compromised priorities are unveiled, her brutal murder at the hands of Aaron is, in a way, justified. She, like Tamora, is animalized in death as Aaron announces: "Wheak, wheak! – so cries a pig prepared for the spit" (*Titus* 4.2.148).

However one looks at the conflicted relations within Tamora's birthing chamber, Aaron's proactive murders of the nurse and, presumably, the midwife Cornelia, do not resolve the issues of his sons' safety and nurturance. As it transpires, Aaron is never capable of delivering the baby to his countryman where his son could be nursed by the man's newly-delivered wife. Standing over the nurse's dead body, he presents his absurd vision of feeding an infant "berries" and "roots" as well as "curds and whey" (*Titus* 4.2.179-80). In a fantasy reminiscent of Romulus and Remus, who were nursed by a she-wolf, Aaron sees his son "sucking" a goat and growing up to be a warrior (*Titus* 4.2.180-1). Aaron's paternal intervention saves his son's life but it also communicates an uncomfortable realization that women as nurturers are invisible and dispensable, while warrior-like masculinity needs to be fashioned independently of maternal, corrupting influence.

Eventually, Aaron's crimes catch up with him and he is captured. Ironically, Aaron's hiding place is uncovered by a Goth soldier who "heard a child cry underneath a wall" (*Titus* 5.1.24). Aaron may have been caught, then, because of his parental inaptness or his biological limitation. He may be a doating father but he is not a nurse who could provide his son with vital nourishment – breast milk – which is a condition for the baby's survival. In the end, Aaron decides to divulge all his secrets in exchange for his son's life. At the closing of the play, Aaron's son lives but the question who becomes his care-taker and nourisher is an open-ended one. Given infants' high mortality in the period the baby's survival is by no means guaranteed. What is clear is the annihilation and erasure of all possibilities for female nurturance. The play closes with the reinstatement of the rule of the Andronici, with whom the vicious cycle of violence and brutality started in the first place. Rather than a cathartic fresh start, one is left with a vision of "beasts and prey" feeding on the maternal body (*Titus* 5.3.197).

**“Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him”: Nursing in *The Winter’s Tale* (2.1.56)**

Similarly to *Titus*, Shakespeare’s romance *The Winter’s Tale* is visibly indebted to maternal imagery, while the events surrounding Hermione’s pregnancy, labour and the lying-in constitute the nexus of tragic events in this seemingly ‘happy’ play. Numerous critics record Leontes’s nervous flight from the body and the anxieties that Hermione’s pregnant body stirs “as a symptom of a deeply entrenched – though not necessary or inevitable – collusion between the representational and libidinal economies of patriarchal culture” (Enterline 2000, 221).<sup>17</sup> Although Hermione is not a transgressive mother like Tamora, her pregnant body, by default, inspires the shocking injustices that befall her once Leontes harbours suspicions of her infidelity. Not only is Hermione a victim but also both her children are deprived of the necessary nurturance. *The Winter’s Tale* emerges as a play haunted by maternal absences and failures of alternative care-taking networks. Along with maternal banishment, Shakespeare stages the wetnurse’s erasure. Both Mamillius, whose very name points to his continued reliance on his nurse’s milk, and infant Perdita are deprived of the nurturing presence of their mother but also a wetnurse who would take her place.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most well-known scenes in which wet-nursing is alluded to but the wet-nursing agent and her work are made invisible is Leontes’ barging into an exclusively female space of Hermione’s imminent birthing chamber. In the spirit of Ruddick’s conceptualization of “maternal thinking” and “preservative love” (1995, 13, 65), in this touching and intimate scene, maternal care is dispersed and divided among other maternal figures as heavily pregnant Hermione appeals to her ladies for help in taking-care of over-energetic Mamillius; “Take the boy to you. He troubles me, / ’Tis past enduring” (*WT* 2.1.1-2). The women take turns in playing with the boy, giving Hermione a momentary respite.<sup>19</sup> Leontes enters this site of collective care-taking and nurture and orders Mamillius to be taken away:

<sup>17</sup> Hermione’s pregnant body has been read as stirring anxieties generated by pregnancy’s “closeness” to unreasonable, uncontrollable nature that opposes seemingly orderly patriarchy e.g. Erickson 1982, 819; Adelman 2003, 146; Cavell 2010, 128; Ephraim 2007, 48; Caporicci 2015, 42; McCandless 1990, 64. For more positive interpretations of mysterious maternal power implicit in the play, see Woodford 2001, 30; Karpinska 2010, 427, 440.

<sup>18</sup> On the name’s etymology, see Woodford 2001, 31.

<sup>19</sup> The scene has also been read in terms of the pleasures and powers implicit in the oral tradition of story-telling. As Lamb writes: “the fear which causes the boy’s violent removal from his mother’s presence . . . gives expression to a similar cultural fear of female influence evoked by oral tales enjoyed in childhood” (2010, 159).

Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him.  
 Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you  
 Have too much blood in him.  
 (WT 2.1.56-8)

Although, as Leontes observes, Hermione did not breastfeed their son, the boy still takes after her; an observation that causes his alarm. Leontes's words have been identified to point to maternal milk and its potentially perilous influence on the infant (Woodford 2007, 28). Leontes, violently removing Mamillius, may be vengefully staging a second maternal separation resulting from the conditions of the wet-nursing culture. In this sense, Leontes's rage grows out of his own maternal deprivation (Paster 1993, 197-208). Both these lines of interpretation point to a patriarchal culture bent on erasing female nurture; be it maternal or growing out of a wider female collective.

In line with early modern medical knowledge, breast milk may influence the infant's appearance or character. Sharp summarizes masculine anxieties of women's powers to shape and transform through nursing: "Many Physicians have troubled themselves and others with unnecessary directions, but the chiefest is to choose a nurse of a sanguine complexion, for that is most predominant in children; and therefore that is most agreeing to their age: but beware you choose not a woman that is crooked, or squint-eyed, nor with a misshapen Nose, or body, or with black Teeth, or with stinking breath, or with any notable depravation; for these are signs of ill manners that the child will partake of by sucking such ill qualified milk as such people yield; and the child will soon be squint-eyed by imitation, for that age is subject to represent, and take impression upon every occasion" (1999, 266). Sharp, a female midwife, partly dismisses male physicians' worries of wet-nurses' influence on the infants but she simultaneously acknowledges that children may inherit physical disabilities from their wetnurses or copy bad character qualities. Woodford argues that: "Though Leontes ruefully admits that he cannot control reproduction because there is 'no barricado for a belly' (1.2.204), he does create a barricado for the breast, and so is able to wrest back control over the influence and shaping of his children" (2007, 188). Yet, this control is evidently illusory as, by his own admission, his son still takes after the mother.

In Leontes's eyes the absent and unnamed wetnurse that breastfed Mamillius is dangerously aligned with the inferiorised maternal influence. Not only is her work synonymous with maternal values but so is her person utterly fused with the maternal figure. The direct violence resulting from Leontes's fury falls on Hermione, accused of adultery, but his fury is extended to the entire birthing and nursing community as he says:

. . . women say so,  
 That will say anything. But were they false  
 As o'erdyed blacks, as wind, as waters, false  
 As dice are to be wished by one that fixes . . .  
 (WT 1.2.130-3)

For Leontes all women involved in care networks are thus suspect and inherently false. One could dismiss Leontes's rage as ramblings of a single, momentarily insane man had it not resulted in a chain of tragic events to which Hermione, Mamillius and Perdita all fall victim to. What is even more disturbing in the suppression of the communal care-taking network is the fact that no one, except for Paulina, really takes Hermione's side. In 2.1. the men at court, express their misgivings but no one, except for Hermione's ladies, follows her. Once Hermione and her ladies are gone, Leontes severs any contacts between Mamillius and the female community, clearly without providing any alternative source of nurture for the boy. As is reported by the servant, the child dies of worry over his mother; "The prince your son, with mere conceit and fear / Of the queen's speed, is gone" (WT 3.2.141-2). Mamillius has not only been deprived of maternal presence, but any female nurture that could help him in dealing with the traumatic separation from his mother.

In *The Winter's Tale* the most wholesome scenes are the ones where maternal work is shared by women whose agency is visible and appreciated. The work of these women fuses tactile bonds with the verbal pleasure of story-telling. The women in 2.1, taking care of Mamillius, are not merely unnamed hands executing seemingly meaningless activities but individuals, whose job is to foster the child's healthy development. As Willett argues: "The caress between parent and child gives a pleasure that is — unless numbed by the alienating labor of patriarchal motherhood — immediately exchanged. It is, moreover, a pleasure easily overlooked" (1995, 39). When the women in 2.1 exchange kisses with Mamillius and invite him to share a story, they shape Mamillius's 'relational' identity but also form a supportive community. It is the importance of this "tactile sociality" that Leontes overlooks when he deprives his son of the contact with the 'dependence' community. On a certain level, he understands the fundamental role of touch in human relationships because his punishments all involve the severing of communal relations based on physical intimacy. On the other hand, Leontes takes every opportunity to mock tactile bonds. When he takes away Mamillius he says:

Bear the boy hence. He shall not come about her.  
 Away with him, and let her sport herself  
 With that she's big with.



(WT 2.1.59-61)

The worst punishment for Hermione is to take away her son, while simultaneously he maliciously mocks any consolation that she may find in her intimate relationship with the baby in her womb.

Leontes's banishment of his daughter Perdita amounts to the communal, tactile deprivation that Mamillius was also subject to. Similarly to the journey that Aaron makes to the Goth camp, Antigonus subjects infant Perdita to a gruelling sea voyage that stretches rules of probability. The question regarding who provides sustenance for Perdita remains open. Picking baby Perdita to carry her away to the ship Antigonus says:

Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens  
To be thy nurses! Wolves and bears, they say,  
Casting their savageness aside, have done  
Like offices of pity.

(WT 2.3.184-7)

Rather than foundational for the development of infant's subjectivity, the acts of nursing are limited here to the mere biological, animalized functions, whose agents are once again dispensable. In fact, they do not even have to be human as wolves and bears may as well serve as human children's nurturers. Who and how nurses Perdita when she is later raised in a male-exclusive Shepherd's house also remains a mystery. As Woodford poignantly summarizes: "While an early modern father could only choose between empowering his wife or empowering a wet-nurse with the shaping of his child through nursing, *The Winter's Tale* presents a more complete circumscription of female power. Perdita is removed not simply from the influence of her mother, but from the influence of any woman. Her upbringing is a fantasy of an exclusively male nurture" (2007, 188).

Similarly to *Titus*, *The Winter's Tale* enacts wetnurses' erasure. In his obsessions Leontes acknowledges the implicit power of wet-nursing in shaping well-rounded individuals. On the other hand, the ease with which he enforces the dissolution of care networks demonstrates systemic failures in the protection of early modern dependents and dependency workers. However, unlike *Titus*, *The Winter's Tale* gives one a glimpse into an intimate reality of female nurturers and their dependants. Given that Sicilia is turned into a hostile desert in the aftermath of Hermione's death and Perdita's banishment, while its King is consumed by guilt and remorse, one can safely assume that, ultimately, *The Winter's Tale* calls for a deepened appreciation of an ethic of care, grounded in the foundational relationship between carers and children. In its passing but weighty allusion to wet-nursing, the play confirms the foundations of human social identities; "The first social bond

occurs not through the dynamics of the gaze but in the mixing of the milky odors of the baby with the milky odors of the mother in skin-to-skin contact” (Willet 1995, 34).

**“I call not you, I call the wet nurse hither”: Nursing in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (2.2.17)**

Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid* is more immersed in the early modern birthing ritual than *Titus* or *The Winter’s Tale*. While in Shakespeare’s plays the ritual is alluded to but ultimately pushed off-stage, Middleton opens the doors to the birthing chamber to show the postpartum woman, her birth attendants and both a dry nurse and a wetnurse on stage.<sup>20</sup> Although the play has been read as “a carnivalesque attack on primogeniture, on the sanctity of bloodlines” (Altieri 1988, 182), while family has been identified as the “functional dramatic unit” and “focus of his comedy” (Chatterji 1965, 107), the female agents in the birthing ritual – mocked and ridiculed by Master Allwit – have more often been identified with Middleton’s misogyny. Paster famously argues that “the female characters of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* reproduce a virtual symptomatology of woman, which insists on the female body’s moisture, secretions, and productions as shameful tokens of uncontrol” (1993, 52). However, female “leakiness” is associated with rank and privilege. In this city comedy, set in an early-capitalist urban reality driven by greed and social ambitions,<sup>21</sup> women are divided along class lines. Privilege determines “an emotional right of way”, according to which rich women are given leave to “express emotions in contrast to their maidservants whose job by and large is not to have individual emotions but instead to use their wits to solve their mistresses’ problems” (Paster 2012, 155). This phenomenon is observable in Middleton’s characterization of the dry and wetnurse in the play.

*A Chaste Maid* gives its audiences three nurses; a dry nurse, wetnurse and one referred to simply as nurse. They are all employed in Allwit’s household as helpers to newly-delivered Mrs Allwit. The famous over-the-top scenes have been identified as a parody of the lying-in of the Countess of Salisbury, wife of William Cecil, the second Earl of Salisbury and son of Robert Cecil (Jenstad 2004, 373). The Allwits’ ambitious social climbing reflects exuberant

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of the birthing ritual’s “exoticization” as an expression of anxiety over exclusively female spaces in *A Chaste Maid*, see Reynolds 2015, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Marrotti believes that Middleton combines his previous interests in “materialism and avarice, bourgeois pretensions, aristocratic degeneracy, religious hypocrisy, libertinism and prodigality” with themes of sexuality and fertility (1969, 65). Following Newman, Anglin argues “for the emergence of an early modern urban subjectivity” (2012, 12).

spending of the new aristocracy in Middleton's mockery of both the urban and higher classes (Jenstad 2004, 394). Following this trail, the number of nurses employed by the Allwits reflects their seemingly limitless financial resources and high social standing. When in 2.3 Allwit calls for a Nurse only to correct himself and say; "I call not you, I call the wet nurse hither", the ensuing confusion highlights the family's overflowing exuberance, at the same time depersonalizing and objectifying both nurses who momentarily seem exchangeable (*Maid* 2.2.17). Yet, Allwit insists on seeing the wetnurse with Sir Walter's baby, unwittingly highlighting the indispensability of her role in the infant's care.

Although Allwit finds it hard to keep up with the work in the household and is confounded by each woman's function, the wetnurse is called into the room as an expert whose role is to confirm the patriarchal paternity narrative weaved by Allwit and Sir Walter. With her 'paternity-bestowing' function, she announces to Allwit: "You may be proud on't sir, / 'Tis the best piece of work that e'er you did" (*Maid* 2.2.21-2). The irony is that the child is Sir Walter's, not Allwit's, which undermines the supposed female power implicit in the birthing ritual. In her liminal position the wetnurse is taken advantage of and limited to her instrumental role of upholding the narratives written by men. Not only in his disgust of the birth attendants' voracity is Allwit demonstrative of his disrespect for female spaces, but he also vocatively distances himself from the work carried out by women;

Here's running to and fro - nurse upon nurse,  
 Three charwomen, besides maids and neighbours' children!  
 Fie, what a trouble have I rid my hands on;  
 It makes me sweat to think on't.  
 (*Maid* 2.2.7-10)

It is evident that the actual day-to-day care over the newly-delivered mother, her infant but also the whole household falls on the nurses who carry the burden of dependency work, additionally having to follow Allwit's whimsical demands and swallow his disrespect.

However, Middleton is by no means equivocal in his presentation of dependency workers. His biting irony is directed as much at the greedy gossips as at Allwit himself. After all, he is the miserly willing cuckold who prostitutes his own wife for financial gain. The nurses in 3.1 are presented as the only hard-working agents whose work is exploited. One may argue that rather than being merely instruments in the hands of patriarchal decision-makers, their presence enables to unveil injustices in contemporary care-networking systems. Their honest work underscores Mrs Allwit's privilege but also Allwit's greed and blindness to the importance of care work. When Allwit dares to act outside his purview and tells the nurse: "Here, take

her in, nurse; wipe her, and give her spoon-meat”, she snaps at him: “Wipe your mouth, sir” and promptly leaves (*Maid* 2.2.30, 31). She neither acknowledges his request nor denies it but treats Allwit as if he were a child in need of scolding. So, although Middleton divides his characters along the lines of privilege, the nurse is not entirely voiceless. On the contrary, she attempts to keep Allwit in line.

Early modern midwifery manuals place requirements on wet-nurses’ appearance, health, manners etc. Hardly anything is written of their needs. As Sharp argues, wet-nurses’ sole gratification is the child’s well-being and possibly the child’s gratitude when they grow up (1999, 267). The nurses in Middleton’s comedy are almost reduced to the hands that carry and feed the baby or bring in plates with food always ready to shout out: “At hand, forsooth.” – as the Nurse at the christening responds when called for (*Maid* 3.1.5). However, how indispensable their work really is may be glimpsed in the absurdist scene when the promoters pull out an abandoned baby from an intercepted basket, thinking it was “a lamb’s head” (*Maid* 2.1.178). Realizing the burden of an infant’s up-keep, the first promoter complains:

Half out getting must run in sugar-sops  
 And nurses’ wages now, besides many a pound of soap  
 And tallow; we have need to get loins of mutton still,  
 To save suet to change for candles  
 (*Maid* 2.2.174-7)

The baby’s presence calls for substantial funds; half of their wages would now go to the hire of a wetnurse whose support is essential. The promoters are more knowledgeable about the infant’s needs than privileged Allwit. Although the wet-nurse’s help would be crucial to feed the baby human milk, in their resolve to buy sugar-sops and candles the men seem resigned to get involved in the infant’s care first-hand.

Middleton’s mockery does not escape anyone in the play. The promoters are evidently greedy like the Allwits. However, although the scene is grotesque, it provides a striking contrast with the scenes of exuberance at the Allwits’ household, in a way subtly signalling a possibility of a dispersed and relational care-network where both women and men cooperate in their dependency work. Middleton’s comedy offers an array of female characters involved in the birthing process, including a wetnurse who is given voice to comment on her work. This voice seemingly serves the legitimization of a patriarchal narrative and yet Middleton’s presentation is open to various interpretations. Nevertheless, despite being given voice, the nurses in the play are instrumentalized and reduced to the activities they perform, while the care itself is not given any meaningful import. Rather care-taking is monetized and becomes a transactional commodity in a nascent capitalist reality;

a reality that would become a norm in the modern world.

## Conclusion

“In the beginning is not the word; it is the touch”; Willet poignantly argues in her outline of maternal ethics (1995, 47). Writing about touch in early modern culture Harvey reminds us that: “Tactility, often despised, repudiated, forgotten, or subsumed into the other senses, is an insistent reminder of corporeality as the necessary condition of our humanity” (2016b, 21). Ethic of care philosophers have argued that touch is foundational for human subjectivity. Wholesome social subjects are first forged in the arms of their nurturers rather than merely in the disembodied socialization process. In early modern drama both maternal and non-maternal carers are often painfully reduced or erased altogether. Maternal figures like Tamora, Hermione or Mrs Allwit either are, or are believed to be, transgressive and therefore their maternal influence is minimized by patriarchal figures. However, the plays’ patriarchs are often faced with an uncomfortable realization that female nurturance is indispensable. So they cling to an illusory idea that agents of nurturance may be exchangeable. Thus, each play has patriarchal figures working hard to devalue human dependency in order to fashion a world in which independent subjects arise free from tactile bonds implicit in nursing. However, each play demonstrates a failure of such blindness to human dependency; with Tamora’s baby’s fate unknown, an emotional desert in the aftermath of Hermione’s death and Perdita’s abandonment, or a chillingly greedy reality of Middleton’s London where some babies are coveted while others are abandoned to their death. A world that fails to recognize the importance of dependency work and dependency workers such as wetnurses is essentially a world that fails dependents – labouring women and their children.

One may argue that wet-nursing in the plays is positioned in such a way as to support the patriarchal status quo; in its insistence on breaking the child-mother bond, wet-nursing presents an alternative that is even more instrumentalized and exploited. Wetnurses become employees in the nascent capitalist system that values neither maternal nor nurturer-child bonds and fails to see them as fundamental to human subjectivity. Kittay argues of modern culture: “The fact that women largely bear the burden of dependency work is a legacy of tradition of sexism, and of sexual taboo against men being involved in the intimate care of women’s bodies” (2019, x). Ultimately, numerous past texts testify to the devalorisation of human touch, which disfranchises both mothers and wet-nurses. This devalorisation is still prevalent in modern culture which fails to see dependency work as fundamental to society’s func-

tioning. Willett argues: “If society is not to consume itself in cycles of predation and sacrifice, ethical theory will have to begin with the tactile sensuality between nurturer and child” (1995, 42). It is crucial to look at how dependency work is presented in canonical texts in order to understand and deconstruct this long-standing tradition of devaluing dependency work and dependency workers, especially because the denial of “the rhythms and tonalities of the carress” (Willett 1995, 38) leads to ruinous consequences. It is high time we looked at dependency workers such as wetnurses in popular culture across the ages in order to accommodate dependency work in our future projects of social change.

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