

**Close to Goodness, Close to Sin: Cultural Meanings of Milk
in England between 1500 and 1650**

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When a baby is born leaking milk from its breast, midwives are unconcerned. Roughly one in twenty infants lactate soon after birth, and odd as it seems, it is not associated with negative health outcomes.¹ The only really remarkable thing is its quaint, old-fashioned name – ‘witch’s milk’. More than simply old-fashioned, in fact, the name dates back to the seventeenth century.² It is an echo of a time both like and unlike our own, a time when ‘witch’s milk’ was a deadly serious affliction, and milk held a potent set of cultural meanings. It is also the tip of an iceberg, the tiny visible part of a mostly hidden cultural inheritance. Milk and breastfeeding were much debated in early modern England, and although these debates took place in a completely different cultural landscape, they bear an eerie resemblance to present-day conversations. This is not an artefact of milk having some kind of universal Freudian significance; between 1500 and 1650 the cultural meanings of milk in England fundamentally changed. Rather, it is part of the first emergence of a set of broader cultural beliefs about the proper function of the body and what it means when bodies fall outside that, beliefs that still run through parts of English language and culture. Milk sat at an uneasy intersection in early modern England: both a vital foodstuff and, inescapably, a bodily fluid.³ Although human milk and animal milks shared many of their cultural and medical significances, they were related to the body in different ways – this

¹ D. J. Madlon-Kay, ‘Witch’s Milk: Galactorrhea in the Newborn’, *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 140/3 (1986), p. 252.

² M. Potts and R. Short, *Ever Since Adam and Eve: The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 145.

³ Human breastmilk was consumed by adults for its curative properties. Although the modern distinction between the culinary and the medical had started to emerge in 16th and 17th century England, it was still less clearly defined than it is now. Milk, and particularly human milk, straddled the two, moving from food to medicine as one aged out of infancy, and then sometimes back to the former in old age. D. Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History* (New Haven, 2011), p. 70; W. Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern Kitchen* (Philadelphia, 2016), p. 4.

article focuses primarily on the former.⁴ By its very nature, milk ran between categories, and overlapped boundaries. It was at once intimate, and commonplace, nutritious, and vulnerable to spoilage. It is the very in-betweenness of milk, its ambiguities and liminalities, which make it a powerful tool through which to approach wider cultural knowledge.

Milk has been the subject of a number of attempts at 'global' cultural history.⁵ The best of these, like Deborah Valenze's 2011 work *Milk: A Local and Global History*, are really a series of narrow historical case studies, and emphasise the heterogeneity of cultural meaning.⁶ Attempts to fashion a global, pan-historical narrative for the cultural meaning of milk are problematised by the wealth of excellent, more narrowly focused, histories of milk in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷ There is no reason to believe that the early modern world was any less imbued with complex and changing cultural associations than the modern one, and in homogenising the cultural significances of milk into one pan-European narrative, historians risk achieving simplicity at the expense of accuracy. For this reason, this article is focused on the cultural meanings of milk in a single country, between 1500 and 1650. By examining representations of milk in different cultural spheres, it is possible to draw together apparently disparate associations, and suggest the ways in which the major religious change of this period could have affected them.

⁴ K. Albala, 'Milk: Nutritious and Dangerous', in H. Walker (ed.), *Milk: Beyond the Dairy – Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999* (London, 2000), p. 26.

⁵ Including Valenze's *Milk: A Local and Global History*, there are five, although one – R. Schmid's book – is an historically dubious argument for the consumption of raw milk. M. Kurlansky, *Milk!: A 10,000 Year Food Fracas* (New York, 2018); A. Mendelson, *Milk: The Surprising Story of Milk Through the Ages* (New York, 2008); R. Schmid, *The Untold Story of Milk – Revised and Updated* (Washington DC, 2009); H. Velten, *Milk: A Global History* (London, 2010).

⁶ Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, p. 5.

⁷ P. Atkins, *Liquid Materialities: a history of milk, science, and the law* (Farnham, 2010); K. Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History Since 1900* (Oxford, 2014).

Religious Context

In early modern Europe, culture and religion were interwoven.⁸ Never simple or unequivocal, the religious significances of milk were thrown into contradiction and conflict by the English Reformation. This had a real impact on diet and practise. It is also a key piece of cultural context, central to understanding and reconciling the conflicted cultural significances of milk in the seventeenth century.

In England in 1500, the Catholic Church provided a set of religiously prescribed, albeit contradictory, meanings for milk. In culinary terms, it was a kind of white meat, subject to the strictures of fasting and abstinence.⁹ Symbolically, it was strongly linked with nurture and purity, and was particularly associated with the Virgin Mary.¹⁰ Although their influence had waned over the centuries, St. Bernard of Clairvaux's interpretive sermons on the Song of Songs had done their work in establishing milk as a symbol of divine grace, prayerful communion and Christian nurture.¹¹ St. Bernard argued for Mary as Mediatrix, and emphasised her maternal capacity in an unsettlingly literal, and powerful, reflection on rebirth.¹² St. Bernard's Marian sensibility had its impact, as did his focus on lactation and milk - although the way suckling was presented in Christian imagery shifted from the eleventh century to the thirteenth, it remained a core piece of religious imagery.¹³ By the start of the thirteenth century, the cultural centrality of 'milk and honey' and of the Song of Songs had given way to a softened boundary between Christ's blood and Mary's milk which, perhaps because of its congruence with scholarly understandings of the origin of

⁸ K. Von Greyerz, *Religion and Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (Oxford, 2008), p. 2.

⁹ C. Yeldham, 'Use of Almonds in Late-medieval English Cookery', in H. Walker (ed.), *Milk: Beyond the Dairy, Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999* (London, 2000), p. 352.

¹⁰ Valenze, *Milk*, p. 18.

¹¹ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on 'The Song of Songs'*, ed. D. Wright, Sermon 9.

¹² St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons of St. Bernard on Advent and Christmas*, (Chicago 1909), Sermon 39.

¹³ C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London, 1987), p. 269.

milk, persisted well into the sixteenth century.¹⁴ More a sensibility than a strict piece of theological meaning, the symbolism of 'giving suck' persisted in Catholic religious iconography, most frequently in images of the nursing Madonna, but also in some depictions of the wound in Christ's side.¹⁵

To the extent that milk was contaminated in Catholic imaginings, it was by its inseparability from female sexual anatomy. It was academic consensus that women ceased to menstruate when pregnant because their menstrual blood instead fed the growing baby. When the child was born, the blood travelled upwards, and was transformed by the heat of the breast into milk.¹⁶ This presented quite a problem to theologians; in addition to being implicitly tied to original sin, menstruation should also have been physically impossible for Mary, based on the physical specifications of the Doctrine of Perpetual Virginity.¹⁷ It was a microcosm of a greater contradiction between the milk and honey of Deuteronomy and the sin assigned to the lactating body. Although there were some attempts to suggest that Mary's milk came directly from heaven, the conflict was for the most part resolved simply through avoidance.¹⁸ Depictions of the Nursing Madonna positioned her breast unnaturally close to her neck, and although milk frequently appeared in religious iconography, it was abstracted from physical realities.¹⁹ In Catholic religious symbolism, milk was at its purest and holiest when it appeared in abnormal places, flowing from the neck of the beheaded St. Catherine, or arcing from a statue of the Madonna to the mouth of St. Bernard.²⁰ Its Biblical

¹⁴ Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 269.

¹⁵ Quirizio da Murano's late fifteenth century depiction of Christ showing his chest wound to a nun applied the stylistic conventions of the *Madonna Lactans* to the adult Christ, showing him tenderly proffering a wound where his nipple would be with two fingers, surrounded by inscriptions of the most cannibalistic passages of the Song of Songs.

Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 271.

¹⁶ Albala, 'Milk: Nutritious and Dangerous', p. 82.

¹⁷ Valenze, *Milk*, p. 47.

¹⁸ M. Fissell, 'The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation', *Representations*, 87 (2004), p. 56.

¹⁹ Valenze, *Milk*, p. 47.

²⁰ Valenze, *Milk*, pp. 43, 48.

significance and association with Marian devotions could then be enjoyed, unsullied by its base origin.

By 1650, however, this imagery had started to go off. Mary had fallen from her pedestal, and belief in minor miracles had become a Catholic shibboleth, invoked by Jesuits and seminary priests.²¹ Protestants increasingly saw God as communicating his message through the 'natural' order and anything perceived to be outside that order became spiritually suspect.²² Whether milk was to be permitted when fasting fell into insignificance next to the question of whether fasting was required, or even permissible.²³ The English Civil War was ongoing, religious tension and suspicion was rife, and the old cultural rules, rites, and protections had been largely discredited or condemned. Milk-imagery was still invoked regularly in religious writing, but through the imagery of the nursing mother, rather than the miraculous fluid. Phrases like 'as milk to children' were used to evoke nurture and sustenance, in spiritual form, but also to chastise. In 1619, for example, Thomas Adams (a Church of England clergyman and prolific writer of Calvinist theology) warned against seeking spiritual sustenance outside the true Christian Church by comparing it to a 'strange' nurse, as opposed to the 'pure milke of your owne mother'.²⁴ These trends were not absolute – English-language Catholic treatises published abroad still referred to the *Lactatio Bernardi* and the Virgin's holy milk – but they were broadly representative.²⁵ In Protestant England, milk was holy, but only in its proper, 'natural', place.

²¹ A. Walsham, 'Miracles and the Counter-Reformation Mission to England', *The Historical Journal*, 46/4 (2003), p. 781.

²² A. Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the Disenchantment of the World" Reassessed', *The Historical Journal*, 51/2 (2008), p. 509.

²³ George Abbot, *The reasons which Doctour Hill hath brought, for the upholding of papistry, which is falselie termed the Catholike religion: unmasked and shewed to be very weake, and upon examination most insufficient for that purpose* (Oxford, 1604), p. 380.

P. Kaufman, 'Fasting in England in the 1560s: "A Thing of Nought"?', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte. Ergänzungsband*, 32 (2003), p. 178.

²⁴ Thomas Adams, *The happines of the church* (London, 1619), p. 56; J. S. McGee, 'Adams, Thomas (1583-1652)', <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-131>>, accessed 12.05.2019.

²⁵ Thomas Vincent and Arthur Anselm Crowther, *Jesus, Maria, Joseph* (Amsterdam, 1657), p. 31.

Breastfeeding

Words and categories can be manipulated in a way that bodies cannot, and no amount of cultural censure could make lactation and breastfeeding entirely the preserve of respectable married mothers, before or after the English Reformations. As well as a symbolic component of the 'natural' family order, woman's milk was a vital physical commodity, both for the nourishment of infants and its purported curative powers. The contraceptive powers of breastfeeding were well-known in early modern England, and placed new mothers and wet-nurses under suspicion of immorality, regardless of what they did.²⁶ Breastfeeding one's own child may have been the epitome of female virtue, but many women would or could not do so. As breastfeeding was a divinely assigned duty, women unable to breastfeed were spiritually suspect, and were offered such unhelpful advice as 'fast and pray'.²⁷ The women who sent their babies to wet-nurses had always been the subject of scholarly critique, but as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wore on, wet-nurses themselves became the targets of religious ire.²⁸ The construction of motherhood as the ideal state of womanhood was nothing new – it was almost inherent in the paradoxical Virgin Mother, who embodied motherhood without sexuality. Nor was the spiritually suspect nature of women who could not or would not fill this role.²⁹ Rather, the shift that can be observed is in the framework through which this was understood, justified, and enforced. Where wet-nursing had been understood as so ideally noble that the Virgin Mary was often represented in the role and garb of a wet-nurse, it was now the subject of a peculiarly

²⁶ V. Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 109.

²⁷ Robert Cleaver, *A godlie forme of householde government for the ordering of priuate families, according to the direction of Gods word. Whereunto is adioyned in a more particular manner, the seuerall duties of the husband towards his wife: and the wifes dutie towards her husband. The parents dutie towards their children: and the childrens towards their parents. The masters dutie towards his seruants: and also the seruants dutie towards their masters. Gathered by R.C* (London, 1598), p. 238.

²⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, greatly chastised women who employed the services of wet-nurses, using the example of his mother who bore seven children and nursed them all.

B. Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse: regulating the dangerous maternal body', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24/5 (2005), p. 576.

²⁹ Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, p. 49.

Protestant genre of attack.³⁰ Women's virtue, ability to breastfeed, and the quality of their milk was subject to scrutiny from Catholic and Protestant writers. In broadly Protestant countries, however, this scrutiny took on the language of the 'natural order', and the imagery of the saintly wet-nurse, the lactating Madonna and Christ giving suck to his followers gave way to a stricter idealisation of 'natural' maternal relations.³¹ Woman's milk was close to goodness, but also to sin. This dual proximity is clearest in the two figures most closely linked to it: the mother and the wet-nurse.

Valerie Fildes' extensive analysis of breastfeeding and infant care in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demonstrates that, in elite and educated circles, a woman choosing to breastfeed her own child was exceptional.³² Elite medical advice was for the most part reflected in elite practice; the age of weaning advised in medical texts was very similar to the age in practice, and there was a large volume of medical writing advising on how to select a wet-nurse.³³ Practically speaking, wet-nurses were one of the facts of life, perfectly ordinary and widely employed. Despite this, wet-nurses and the mothers who employed them were the subject of a disproportionately large volume of writing by learned Protestant moralists, mostly in the form of instructions, admonitions and warnings.³⁴ These admonitions did not just come from theologians, or even male writers – Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln published a pamphlet in 1622 advising women to nurse their own children.³⁵ The change that took place over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not

³⁰ B. Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination & Reception* (Suffolk, 2009), p. 132; Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse', p. 576.

³¹ Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the Disenchantment of the World" Reassessed', p. 509; Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 270-272; Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse: regulating the dangerous maternal body', p. 576.

³² V. Fildes, 'The age of weaning in Britain 1500-1800', *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 14/2 (1982), p. 235.

³³ Although whether that is because the medical advice was followed or because it simply reflected established practise is not possible to determine from the information given. Fildes, 'The age of weaning', p. 223.

³⁴ P. Crawford, "'The sucking child': Adult attitudes to child care in the first year of life in seventeenth-century England', *Continuity and Change*, 1/1 (1986), p. 31.

³⁵ Clinton was no less stern in her admonitions than her contemporaries, but perhaps a little kinder – she herself had not breastfed her own children (a choice, the text suggests, that was taken from her) and regretted it. Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes nurserie* (Oxford, 1622), p. 16.

a shift from a culture in which women were granted relative freedom over their bodies to one in which they were not, but rather a shift in the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of misogynistic critique and control.

Newly-Protestant England did see a profusion of publications warning against the practice of wet-nursing but this was perhaps as much the result of an increase in published material as an increase in paranoia about the risks posed by wet nursing.³⁶ Anti-wet-nursing arguments in sixteenth and seventeenth century English published material can be usefully divided into two overlapping categories. The first is broadly medical, and included authors from a variety of denominations, including translations of the writings of physicians from Catholic countries, such as the work of the French physician Jacques Guillemeau (published in England in 1612).³⁷ Medical warnings against wet-nursing were often premised on the role of woman's milk as a primary agent of heredity, as at least in elite medical writing, it was through breastfeeding that humoral balance could be shared.³⁸ The humoral balance of the mother or wet-nurse was, therefore, of utmost importance to the health, appearance, and character of the baby.³⁹ Some writers advised that nurses be selected based on the physical traits that indicated their humoral balance, whereas some, like Guillemeau, believed that the milk itself was sufficient to determine the humoral qualities; a blueish tinge indicating melancholy, yellow suggesting cholera, and a reddish tinge either showing an excess of the sanguine humour or a failure of the heat of the breasts to fully transform uterine blood into milk.⁴⁰ Humoral balance was also understood as a sexed characteristic carried in milk, albeit one on a spectrum. A prospective wet-nurse needed to

³⁶ Crawford, 'The sucking child', p. 31.

³⁷ Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-birth or, The happy deliuerie of women VVherein is set downe the gouernment of women* (London, 1612), p.7.

³⁸ Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse', p. 577.

³⁹ S. Prühlen, 'What was Best for an Infant from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Times in Europe? The Discussion Concerning Wet Nurses', *Hygiea Internationalis: an Interdisciplinary Journal for the History of Public Health*, 6/2 (2007), p. 205.

⁴⁰ Guillemeau, *Child-birth or, The happy deliuerie of women*, p.7.

have a child of the right sex or risk making a male baby grow into effeminacy, or a female baby 'a man-like Virago' – the latter of these was sometimes treated as a potentially desirable outcome, whereas the former was despised.⁴¹ Guillimeau, for example, advises choosing a nurse who has had a male child as the milk will be 'hotter, better concocted; and not so excrementitious'.⁴² The potential problems of an improper wet-nurse were not, however, merely physical, and it was the behavioural criteria for wet-nurses that drew the most hysterical, and telling, commentary.

The second category can be described as arguments grounded in medicine *and* morality. The character and behaviour of the nurse were understood as intimately connected to the material quality of the milk, but were dangerously hidden – from the wrong nurse, even the sweetest, richest milk could be riddled with corruption.⁴³ Protestant moral polemicists gave the impression that a wet-nurse of good character and speech was a rare find among the 'drowsie drunkards', 'sawsie sluttess' and 'gawde gossips'.⁴⁴ Good milk was, of course, good, but it was also rare, and milk concealed sin as easily as it did disease. The risks of a morally dubious wet-nurse were twofold; as Presbyterian non-conformist Robert Cleaver stated in his 1598 publication on household government, 'the temperature of the minde followes the constitution of the bodie, needes must it be, that if the nurse be of a naughty nature, the child must take thereafter'.⁴⁵ Not only might the child become morally degraded by the humoral content of the milk, but they also were placed at risk of neglect or

⁴¹ Virago was a culturally complex term- positive, for its associations with virtues constructed as male, but also always implying a subtle gendered transgression.

J. A. Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford, 2014), p. 107; Prühlen, 'What was best for an Infant', p. 205; Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse', p. 578.

⁴² Guillimeau, *Child-birth*, p. 8.

⁴³ Valenze, *Milk*, p. 156.

⁴⁴ Barthélemy Batt can be presumed to have belonged to some Protestant denomination, as his work contains references to 'Papists' alongside 'Iewes, Turkes, Infidels'.

Barthélemy Batt, *The Christian man's closet Wherein is contained a large discourse of the godly training up of children: as also of those duties that children owe unto their parents, made dialogue wise, very pleasant to reade, and most profitable to practise, collected in Latin by Bartholomew Batty of Alostensis, And now Englished by William Lowth*, (London, 1591), pp. 16, 54.

⁴⁵ Robert Cleaver, *A godlie forme of householde government*, p. 238-

even deliberate injury. Where Catholic Guillemeau described wet-nurses who 'deserve to be whipt', for secretly feeding their charge water instead of milk, Protestant writers drew a more direct connection between the immorality of the nurse and the quality of the milk - Barthélemy Batt warned against not only the 'corrupt maners', 'unseemly words' and 'fained & dissembled love' of a wet-nurse, but also 'pernicious contagion', 'odious errors', and 'detestable diseases'.⁴⁶ Milk could aspire to only one kind of goodness, but was at risk from all kinds of sin.

The major difference was not the extent of the suspicion and ire directed towards wet-nurses and women who did not breastfeed their children, but the way it was framed. In Protestant literature, mothers who chose to employ the services of wet-nurses were subject to the most vitriolic tirades because they had committed the ultimate betrayal of their *natural role*.⁴⁷ This is clearest in Elizabeth Clinton's writing. Clinton described women choosing not to breastfeed as an 'vnnaturall practise', and asserted that the urge to breastfeed was 'the worke that God worketh in the very nature of mother'.⁴⁸ The mother's first duty was understood to be to her child, and a woman who was capable of nourishing an infant but chose not to flouted the first principles of Christian womanhood – to Clinton, these women were literally going 'against nature'.⁴⁹ These women, memorably derided by Robert Cleaver as 'daintie halfe-mothers', were rejecting God's intended use for their 'two breasts', and relegating them to the distinctly un-Godly purpose of 'ostentation'.⁵⁰ It was not only milk that found itself precariously close to sin and virtue – the maternal body was caught in the same impossible position. For women, simply having breasts was potentially

⁴⁶ Batt, *The Christian man's closet*, pp. 54 -55.

⁴⁷ Åström, 'Sucking the Corrupte Mylke of an Infected Nurse', pp. 576, 578.

⁴⁸ Clinton's pamphlet contained a foreword by a Catholic doctor (Thomas Lodge), but was steeped in the distinctly post-Reformation language of natural law pp. 1, 8.

⁴⁹ Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes nurserie*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Cleaver, *A godlie forme of householde government*, p. 240.

sinful, unless their bodies were sanctified by their 'proper' function of the nurturing of infants.

The demonisation of wet-nurses and women who did not breastfeed resists a simple narrative. It was not, for example, just men writing against the practice of wet-nursing. Similarly, although there is a clear change over time in the framing of fears about wet-nursing that coincides with the English Reformations and appears to be thematically linked to the cultural changes they wrought, by the seventeenth century Catholic and Protestant English writers were using the language of the 'natural order' to assert the importance of women nursing their own babies.⁵¹ Attitudes to breastfeeding bore a relation to theological change, but it was not always linear or predictable. The same can, in fact, be said of the critiques' relation to material reality. The same two centuries that saw an explosion of anti-wet nursing tracts saw an increase in the uptake of the services of wet-nurses by the aristocracy.⁵² This did not necessarily mean that these ideas were not widely shared – the way sex workers have been related to culturally suggests that it is perfectly possible for someone to pay a woman for labour, and also believe that she is inherently immoral for performing that labour, especially when misogyny and unequal wealth informs the relationship. This does, however, raise the greatest contradiction in this body of writing – men, for the most part, had the power to choose whether or not to hire a wet-nurse, and yet the admonitions are primarily directed towards women.⁵³

The position of breastfeeding in sixteenth and seventeenth century England is therefore best understood as part of a continuity of misogynistic control of women's bodies, newly framed by a developing religious and cultural idea of 'natural order'. Wider fears about the behaviour of mothers coalesced around the ways they did or did not use their

⁵¹ Thomas Lodge ended his foreword to Clinton's pamphlet with a verse about 'Gods and Natures lawes', for example.

⁵² Fildes, 'The age of weaning in Britain 1500-1800', p. 235.

⁵³ Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, p. 279.

milk, and the privacy and uncontrollability of breastfeeding made it a focus for misogynistic anxiety and censure. Woman's milk was potent, and impossible to truly regulate. It was intimately connected to an unpredictable, and emotionally dangerous endeavour – the raising of infants. Tied by the logics of humoral medicine to menstruation, the original sin of the female body, milk straddled the holy and the sinful. Where it had once stood between the ideal of motherhood and the sin of female sexuality, it was now caught between the natural and the unnatural. How it was understood seems to have been powerfully situational; breastfeeding may have sanctified a mother's body, but the private milky communion between a wet-nurse and her charge was deeply suspect. Valuable as a commodity, it was nonetheless troubling as a phenomenon. In a humoral understanding of the body, breastfeeding was a moment of vulnerability, where the boundary between two bodies briefly became permeable. In a formal wet-nursing relationship, one of those bodies was necessarily that of a poor woman. This was milk *out of place*. The abstract good of late-medieval milk had given way to a precarious virtue, no less powerful, but possibly more dangerous to the women touched by it.

Witchcraft

Although the historiography of the witch-trials themselves is remarkably well populated, the sources have been surprisingly underused by food historians. Though limited in many respects, these records have great potential; many of them contain transcriptions of illiterate people's accounts of the events, being one of the only situations in which the narrated experiences of labourers were deemed worthy of recording. They are, of course, profoundly distorted – due to the nature of English court recording, depositions being neither detailed nor routinely preserved, most of the detailed sources available are publications after the

fact, by individuals who had no legal obligation to record accurately, and may have filtered what they heard through their own, usually learned, gaze.⁵⁴ A further problem is that some of the testimonies they contain were extracted under torture, or threat of it, and are often so fantastical that they clearly cannot be taken as literal truth.⁵⁵

That said, there are few discernible reasons for writers to consistently alter the references to food in recording the events of witch-trials, or for individuals giving testimonies to thoroughly misrepresent their own attitudes to food. Furthermore, the more fantastical references to milk and breastfeeding, understood within the context of the types of imagery which occur repeatedly in the English witch-trials, can be useful in their own right, as a window into the symbolic and folkloric meanings of the substance. References to milk and other dairy products, and breastfeeding-type imagery, occurred disproportionately frequently in published records of English witch-trials. Historians of milk have generally considered it to be culturally and culinarily in decline in this period, losing its associations with piety and its status as healthy and nourishing, and yet to acquire its implications of purity and modernity.⁵⁶ The evidence of the witch-trials suggests that not only was milk central to the diets of rural families, but that it held a cultural significance that reflected that centrality.

Even if early modern milk was nourishing, it was also deeply culturally dangerous. Animal milks were vulnerable to all kinds of magical manipulation, and feature disproportionately frequently in the accounts of the English witch trials. Human milk was even more risky. While breastfeeding mothers might be fulfilling their role in a divinely

⁵⁴ M. Gaskill, 'Witches and Witnesses in Old and New England', in S. Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (London, 2001), p. 55.

⁵⁵ Torture was generally prohibited in English law, allowed only extrajudicially against traitors in order to get information about their accomplices. Between 1645 and 1647, however, local authorities did torture witchcraft suspects; B. Levack, 'Witchcraft Trials in England, Scotland, and New England', in B. Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (2nd ed.) (Abingdon, 2015), p. 241.

⁵⁶ M. Kurlansky, *Milk!: A 10,000 Year Food Fracas* (New York, 2018), p. 28.

ordained natural order, other instances of lactation in humans could be assigned no such purpose. In the uneasy religious climate of the seventeenth century, there were only two potential explanations for 'unnatural' happenings; divine or satanic. Across Europe, neonatal lactation was feared, called 'witch's milk', 'hexenmilch' and 'lait de sorcière', and implicated in accusations of witchcraft.⁵⁷ The connection between witchcraft and milk was shared between a number of countries and regions. Michael Ostling argued that the importance of milk-magic to many of the Polish witch-trials was due to centrality of milk-yields in what Lyndal Roper described as 'the economy of bodily fluids'.⁵⁸ The yield of a cow was at once a physical and symbolic indicator of a family's prosperity, and the witch drained that prosperity.⁵⁹ Although the English witch-trials shared much with those of Poland, the abundance of milk-magic and milk-imagery in them seems to have had a slightly different symbolic significance, one as much connected to woman's milk as it was to cow's milk.

A feature common to many of the European witch-trials is the imagery of inversion. This is exemplified by the witches' sabbath, an unholy gathering which perverted and inverted the rituals of the Christian sabbath. English witch-trials generally lacked the imagery of the witches' sabbath, but were not lacking in inversion imagery. One of the key sites on which this imagery was focused was the lactating body. While breastfeeding mothers were fulfilling their role in a divinely ordained natural order, other instances of lactation in humans could be assigned no such purpose, and were highly suspect.

Although the English witch trials lacked much of the sexual imagery common to many of the European witchcraft traditions, they were still highly linked to the physicality of

⁵⁷ M. Potts and R. Short, *Ever Since Adam and Eve: The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 145.

⁵⁸ M. Ostling, 'Witchcraft in Poland: Milk and Malefice' in B. P. Levack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford, 2013), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Ostling, 'Witchcraft in Poland', p. 3.

the sexed body, through the way the demonic familiars who fed on the blood of witches were described.⁶⁰ The descriptions of these familiars feeding use the same language as descriptions of breastfeeding; familiars ‘suck’ from witches, and witches ‘give suck’ to familiars, the same language used to describe babies feeding from nurses or mothers.⁶¹ How exactly this took place varied quite significantly between witch trials. In some cases, such as the accounts of the testimonies of Anne Whittle in the Pendle Witch trials in 1612, and Elizabeth Francis at Chelmsford in 1566, the familiar merely sucked blood from an inconspicuous body part of an accused witch, leaving a mark like a mole, which could then be used to determine their guilt.⁶² Many descriptions, however, verge much closer to the image of the nursing mother. In some cases, where the familiar sucked, a raised teat developed.⁶³ In others, an entirely new ‘dugge’ or ‘pappe’ (breast) was formed where the familiar was ‘given suck’.⁶⁴ The positioning on the body was also not always simply neutrally hidden. Some familiars sucked from the breasts as true babes, or from the flank or just under the breast. Many, however, took their nourishment from much more intimate places, such as inside the mouth, behind the ear, the buttocks, and the ‘secrets’.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ J. M. Garrett, ‘Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 13/1 (2013), p. 36.

⁶¹ The Wonderful Discoverie of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower, daughters of Joan Flower, near Beaver Castle, Executed at Lincoln, March 11, 1618, in B. Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (2nd ed.) (Oxford, 2015), p. 258;

A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, 1645, in B. Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (2nd ed.) (Oxford, 2015), p. 274; A. M., *Queen Elizabeths closset of physical secrets, with certain approved medicines taken out of a manuscript found at the dessolution of one of our English abbies and supplied with the child-bearers cabinet, and preservative against the plague and small pox. Collected by the elaborate paines of four famons [sic] physitians, and presented to Queen Elizabeths own hands.* (London, 1656), p. 19.

⁶² The Examination and Confession of Certain Witches at Chelmsford in the County of Essex before the Queen’s Majesty’s Judges, the XXVI Day of July Anno 1566, in B. Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (2nd ed.) (Oxford, 2015), p. 244;

Thomas Potts, *The v wonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster VWith the arraignment and triall of nineteene notorious witches, at the assizes and general gaole deliuerie, holden at the castle of Lancaster, vpon Munday, the seuteenth of August last, 1612.* (London, 1613), p. C.

⁶³ A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 276.

⁶⁴ The Confession of Margaret Johnson, in J. Crossley (ed.), *Pott’s Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster*, Volume 6 (Manchester, 1845), p. lxxv.

⁶⁵ A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 276.

The Wonderful Discoverie of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower, p. 259.

Belief in familiars, historically linked with popular belief in fairies, has been used as evidence of a reciprocal relationship between elite and popular culture in early modern England, a relationship this thesis advocates for in food history.⁶⁶ Intellectual belief in demonic familiars was contested and fraught, but they nonetheless occur in the vast majority of English witch-pamphlets from the period and became codified in Matthew Hopkins's instructions for the determining of guilt of an accused witch, making them an ideal focal point through which to explore the relationship between popular and elite attitudes to breastfeeding, milk, and the maternal body.⁶⁷ One particularly interesting facet of the familiar beliefs is the way they seem to reflect and interact with humoral understandings of milk and breastfeeding. Whereas milk was blood, transformed through the heat of the breast into a digestible and nourishing state, witches fed their familiars with blood, and one of the identifying characteristics of the witches' teat was that it was cold to the touch. This was one among many maternal inversions.⁶⁸ Women killed their children, struck their husbands lame and had them killed, and with the assistance of the devil aborted their fetuses with herbs and potions. The image of the woman suckling a demon in the form of an animal, with blood instead of milk, makes sense within the context of such inversion. The popular origin of belief in familiar spirits suggests that there may have been a popular association between milk and blood, that did not directly come from elite medical theory.

It was not only women suspected of witchcraft who were accused of suckling their familiars, however. There are several instances of men, accused of witchcraft, being described as doing similarly. The octogenarian vicar John Lowes, accused of witchcraft in

⁶⁶ G. Warburton, 'Gender, Supernatural Power, Agency and the Metamorphoses of the Familiar in Early Modern Pamphlet Accounts of English Witchcraft', *Parergon*, 20/2 (2003), p. 96.

⁶⁷ A True Relation of eightene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 277.

⁶⁸ S. Clarke, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft', *Past & Present*, 87 (1980), p. 86.

the Matthew Hopkins-led witch trials in Suffolk in 1645, was described as having ‘a teat on the crown of his head and two under his tongue’.⁶⁹ Thomas Evered, a cooper, who was accused of witchcraft alongside his wife Mary Evered in the same 1645 set of trials, was described as giving suck to imps.⁷⁰ This is a particularly interesting example, despite meriting only two sentences in the account of the largest witch-hunt in English history, because the particular crime Evered was accused of was so distinctly gendered; in addition to having imp familiars, the couple were accused of having bewitched beer to smell so ‘odious’ that the stink and taste of it killed many people.⁷¹ As Lara Apps and Andrew Gow observed in their book *Male witches in early modern Europe*, male witches were implicitly feminised, both through being accused of witchcraft, itself a profoundly gendered accusation, and through being associated with sensory domains typed as female in early modern constructions of gender, specifically smell and taste.⁷² Evered was therefore doubly feminised, through the nature of his crime, and the sexed nature of the standard elements of an accusation of witchcraft.⁷³ This was not milk out of place, so much as *everything* out of place – milk inverted as blood, and woman as man.

The use of breastfeeding-type imagery in the English witch trials is further evidence of the fraught cultural meaning of the maternal body. Breastfeeding’s precarious holiness lent any kind of distortion of it a profound cultural potency. The sucking familiars resembled an unholy communion, a taking of blood meaning damnation, rather than a receiving of blood as salvation. It inverted religious and natural order, intertwined as they were. It demonstrates just how precarious, and how potent, milk really was.

⁶⁹ A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 274.

⁷⁰ A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 274.

⁷¹ A True Relation of eighteene Witches that were arraigned, tried, and convicted at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-bury in Suffolk, p. 274.

⁷² L. Apps and A. Gow, *Male witches in early modern Europe* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 128-9.

⁷³ This particular account bears a sad resemblance to Quirizio da Murano’s bleeding messiah – set against an ideal of natural order, the once-holy image became damning.

One aspect of the witch-trial evidence which seriously challenges the historical consensus on early modern dairy consumption is simply the centrality and prevalence of milk, cheese, and butter, in so many of the depositions. In elite circles there was a decline in the unique cultural position milk had previously possessed as a culinary ingredient going into the early modern period.⁷⁴ The Pendle witch trials, in particular, provide a potential insight into the cultural significance of milk to people with very little immediate contact to the medical theorising that knocked milk off its medieval pedestal. Milk and dairy products were the subjects of many of the magical acts apparently witnessed. In the Examination of Edmund Robinson in 1633, an act of magic is described where ropes attached to the roof of a house are pulled, rather like church bells, and butter, milk, and smoking meat shower down into buckets.⁷⁵ Butter was made from milk without ever depleting the quantity of milk, the spilling of milk caused familiar spirits to disappear, and when a man kicked over a can of milk he had given in charity, his cow died the next day.⁷⁶ Boiling a can of milk brought forth a toad-like spirit (toads were themselves associated with the female body in medical writing due to their apparent resemblance to the shape of a uterus).⁷⁷ Milk begged and denied brought fear and sickness to the denier - the sheer prevalence of milk in the imagery of the English witch-trials is enough to suggest at its huge cultural power and danger.

As Michael Ostling argued about the Polish witch-trials, milk's status as an indispensable yet vulnerable commodity may have contributed to its particular centrality to accusations of spell-casting. Milk spoils suddenly and repulsively, cows die without warning or explanation, and when cheese-making goes awry, it is often for reasons invisible to the naked eye. Milk-magic was not, however, solely responsible for the prevalence of milk in the

⁷⁴ Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, p. 4, p. 59.

⁷⁵ Thomas Potts, *The vvonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster*, p. lxiii.

⁷⁶ Thomas Potts, *The vvonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster*, 'The Examination of Allizon Device', para. 4.

⁷⁷ Thomas Potts, *The vvonderfull discoverie of witches in the countie of Lancaster*, 'The Examination of Iennet Booth', para. 1; E. Gradwohl, 'The Toad and the Uterus: the symbolics of inscribed frogs', *Sylloge epigraphica Barcinonensis*, 10 (2012), p. 440.

English witch-trials. Witch's milk, the witch's teat, and the suckling demon all suggest at another dimension to the cultural significance of milk. Layered into narratives of the inverted ideals of Christian motherhood, they call to a substance which was uniquely close to virtue and vulnerable to sin. Milk in its proper place was a blessing, sanctifying and justifying the body of the mother, but outside of that was deeply spiritually troubling. When animal milks and woman's milk are treated as culturally linked, their significance to the witch-trials can be understood multidimensionally. Milk was both physically and spiritually vulnerable, inhabiting a tenuous place of virtue but unable to escape its connections to menstruation, and consequently original sin. It is no surprise that it flowed through the language of the witch-trials – it was the body out of order, unruly, uncontrollable, and potentially unholy.

Conclusion

Milk has been the subject of a number of attempts at 'global' cultural history.⁷⁸ The best of these, like Deborah Valenze's 2011 work *Milk: A Local and Global History*, are really a series of narrow historical case studies, and emphasise the heterogeneity of cultural meaning.⁷⁹ Attempts to fashion a global, pan-historical narrative for the cultural meaning of milk are problematised by the wealth of excellent, more narrowly focused, histories of milk in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸⁰ There is no reason to believe that the early modern world was any less imbued with complex and changing cultural associations than the

⁷⁸ Including Valenze's *Milk: A Local and Global History*, there are five, although one – R. Schmid's book – is an historically dubious argument for the consumption of raw milk. M. Kurlansky, *Milk!: A 10,000 Year Food Fracas* (New York, 2018); A. Mendelson, *Milk: The Surprising Story of Milk Through the Ages* (New York, 2008); R. Schmid, *The Untold Story of Milk – Revised and Updated* (Washington DC, 2009); H. Velten, *Milk: A Global History* (London, 2010).

⁷⁹ Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ P. Atkins, *Liquid Materialities: a history of milk, science, and the law* (Farnham, 2010); K. Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History Since 1900* (Oxford, 2014).

modern one, and in homogenising the cultural significances of milk into one pan-European narrative, historians risk achieving simplicity at the expense of accuracy. For this reason, this article is focused on the cultural meanings of milk in a single country, between 1500 and 1650. By examining representations of milk in different cultural spheres, it is possible to draw together apparently disparate associations, and suggest the ways in which the major religious change of this period could have affected them.

Milk did not have one simple set of cultural associations in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England, but rather had an array of meanings, governed by subculture, but also by situation. It invoked associations of nurture, purity, barbarity, charity, poverty, and motherhood. Although it was undoubtedly gendered as feminine, through the realities of average human biology and traditional gendered divisions of labour, it was not exclusively associated with women, and association with it was used to situate some men closer to womanhood. It was heavily used in Christian religious language and imagery, but in very different ways by writers in Catholic and Protestant regions. As the religious landscape of England shifted, the religious significance of milk also changed, as close as ever to goodness, but perilously close to sin. The religious meanings of milk became ever more contested and fraught during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and its significance became less about it as a substance, and more about whether it occurred without the bounds of the 'natural' function of a body.

The conflicted cultural meanings of milk were not merely an artefact of the variety of cultural, social, and material factors affecting individuals' perspectives on it. Milk was a profoundly liminal fluid, and this liminality is reflected in certain major conflicts in its meaning. Straddling the intersection of the virtuous and the sinful, and the body and that which lay outside it, milk was steeped in contradiction and conflict. The well-populated genre of vitriolic Protestant tracts against mothers choosing not to breastfeed and the

widespread presence of distorted breastfeeding-type imagery in the English witch-trials both highlight how crucial milk and breastfeeding was to the virtuous female body. Like milk, the maternal body was unpredictable, vulnerable to spiritual spoilage and hidden corruption. Milk, and the act of breastfeeding, had huge spiritual and cultural potency, and no exact prescribed religious meaning. Set at the table of blood and meat, and their eucharistic counterparts, wine and bread, milk was uniquely ambiguous, and therefore uniquely dangerous.

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