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## The Female Breast in Reformation Culture

WITHIN EARLY MODERN DISCOURSE there are at least six positions for the female breast to occupy. The breast may be offered as the locus of pleasure, certainly for the man and sometimes for the woman as well; its appearance may be taken as a sign of immodesty; given the opportunity, it can become the instigator of temptation; at the same time, the breast is figured as a source of nurture authorized by nature and ordained by God; it can therefore stand for the Christian virtue of charity; and, depending on how access to the breast is arranged, it can also be an index of economic and social difference. Most of these readings of the breast have produced enough echoes within our own culture to make them seem familiar. But I want to begin by illustrating each of them, very briefly, in the language of early modern writers themselves.<sup>1</sup>

For the breast as the site of sexual pleasure we could refer to any number of blazon poems (a form cataloguing aspects of the beloved's appearance), such as Sir Philip Sidney's "What Tongue Can her Perfections Tell." Here the speaker, having praised the lady's hair, forehead, eyes, cheeks, and neck, moves "A little downward" to discover:

The lovely clusters of her breasts,  
Of *Venus*' babe the wanton nests.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shorter versions of this article were presented orally at the international conference on *The Flesh Made Text: Bodies, Theories, Cultures in the Post-Millennial Era* (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, 2003) and at the annual meetings of the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies/Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance (University of Manitoba, 2004). The second of these presentations was awarded the Montaigne Prize (as the best paper presented to the society for that year). I am grateful to both audiences for their creative responses, and especially to Brenda Dunn-Lardeau for her generous advice.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 87.

But this rather formal appeal to pleasure (by means of an allusion to Cupid) is easily outdone by Milton's description of Eve, who tells Adam how she was first led to him by a divine voice, and then punctuates her narration with body language:

half her swelling breast  
Naked met his under the flowing gold  
Of her loose tresses hid. (4.495–97)<sup>3</sup>

We are immediately given two male reactions to this tantalizing moment: Adam of course is filled with an explicitly sexual "delight" (496) in what his helpmeet has to offer, but the second reaction is even more telling: "Aside the Devil turned / For envy" (501–02). The implicit voyeurism of this moment is a subject to which I shall return, but for now it is enough to notice that Eve's "swelling breast," so nicely divided into two by the word "half," is the source of everyone's pleasure: Adam's, the Devil's, the reader's, and perhaps Eve's own.

It would be tempting at this point to refer to Botticelli's celebrations of the female body, as in *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1485), but I suggest making the turn to visual culture with Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (colour plate 1). This painting has been persuasively explicated by Erwin Panofsky as an implicit warning about the dangers of luxury.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of where Bronzino wants the viewer to situate him/herself, the picture foregrounds the erotic breast as the locus of pleasure; furthermore, it frames that pleasure in ways we might find uncomfortable, or at least ambiguous. The adolescent Cupid is clearly too close to puberty to be taking an innocent interest in his mother's breast, and perhaps that is why Father Time, in the top-righthand corner, approaches the scene with an attitude that comes across as both hostile and voyeuristic.

*Cupid Complaining to Venus* (colour plate 2) by Lucas Cranach the Elder is also an allegory, this time on the theme of the ambivalence of pleasure: the sweetness of the honeycomb has betrayed Cupid, and he must now suffer the pain of being stung. Even though Cranach worked in Wittenberg, as court painter to the Elector of Saxony, and was a personal friend of Martin Luther's, his treatment of the female body has more in common with the humanism of Botticelli than with the later inhibitions of

<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 286.

<sup>4</sup> See *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; New York: Harper, 1962) 86–88.



Colour Plate 1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1534).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.



Colour Plate 2. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Cupid Complaining to Venus* (c. 1525).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.



Colour Plate 3. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve* (1526).  
Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London.



Colour Plate 4. Dieric Bouts, *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1470).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

Protestantism. Admiration for the human form is clearly part of the agenda in Cranach's *Adam and Eve* (colour plate 3). Notice the similarity in pose between Eve and Venus in the previous image. Notice also the part played by the female breast in the process of temptation; the apple which Eve offers to Adam and which he cups with his hand is in effect a third breast or, as in the poetry of the period, a metaphoric breast.

If pleasure is by definition innocent in Eden, at least for Adam and Eve, it is nonetheless a source of temptation too. And in the fallen world of early modern society, innocence is no longer available. Here display of the female breast is taken as a mark of immodesty. In *Faultes, Faults, and Nothing Else But Faultes* Barnabe Rich offers a catalogue of and running commentary on what he takes to be the vices of his time, and in the following passage he points to the special vices of women: "What newfangled attires for the heades, what flaring fashions in their garments, what alteration in their ruffes, what painting of faces, what audacious boldnes in company, what impudencie, and what immodestie is used by those that will needes be reputed honest, when their open breasts, their naked stomackes, their frizled haire, their wanton eye, their shameles countenance, are all the vaunt [couriers] of adulterie."<sup>5</sup> The display of "open breasts" is accompanied here (and in many other texts) with the charge of immodest attitudes and behaviour. Taken just one step further this rhetoric implies that the breast is an instrument of temptation. In *Christs Teares Over Jerusalem*, a pamphlet which decries the lax moral fibre of Londoners in 1593, Thomas Nashe argues that women, following the example of Eve, have taken on the double role of "the tempted and the tempter." Among their strategies of enticement, which Nashe enumerates at length, is the expected one: "Theyr breasts they embuske up on hie, and their round Roseate buds immodestly lay forth, to shew at theyr hands ther is fruite to be hoped."<sup>6</sup> The busk in early modern corsetry was a piece of wood or whalebone fitted into the stomacher, here used to lift the woman's breasts ("embuske up on hie") into greater visual prominence. And the image of woman's hand offering fruit is a virtual allusion to the temptation of Adam by Eve.

The breast as provider of nourishment is the subject of Elizabeth Clinton's book, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie*. Clinton regrets that she was unable to breastfeed any of her eighteen children, not for any

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<sup>5</sup> *Faultes, Faults, and Nothing Else But Faultes* (London, 1606) sig. G3-3<sup>v</sup>. The original has "errours" instead of "couriers."

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow and F.P. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) 2: 136, 137.

physiological reason, but because she “*was overruled by anothers authority,*”<sup>7</sup> presumably that of her husband. She now believes that breastfeeding is in keeping with “the expresse ordinance of God” (sig. B1<sup>v</sup>), that it is “both naturall and comfortable” (sig. A2<sup>v</sup>), and that it doesn’t spoil a woman’s appearance: “it hath beene observed in some women,” she claims, “that they grew more beautifull” after “nursing their owne children” (sig. C3<sup>v</sup>). For all of these reasons Clinton wishes she had been a nursing mother, and she takes a kind of secondary gratification in watching her daughter-in-law, Briget Countess of Lincoln, carry out her program: “for you have passed by all excuses, and have ventured upon, & doe goe on with that loving act of a loving mother; in giving the sweete milke of your owne breasts, to you owne childe” (sig. A2).

The *Virgin and Child* tableau offers ready access to the maternal breast as represented in early modern visual culture. In Dieric Bouts’s version of this theme (colour plate 4), the Child shows no interest in the Virgin’s breast, but she is manifestly preoccupied with it herself; for this reason, and because of its placement at the exact centre of the picture, the breast becomes the inescapable focus of visual attention. By squeezing the nipple between her two fingers, doubtless in order to encourage the expression of milk, the Virgin identifies her breast as a tactile object too, ready and waiting for the touch of the infant’s lips.

As chief painter to the Flemish city of Louvain in the late fifteenth century, Bouts is clearly working within a well-established Catholic tradition. But the imagery of the scene was domesticated by later Protestant painters. Pieter de Hooch, born in Rotterdam and baptized in the Dutch Reformed Church, renders breastfeeding as a natural event in the life of an ordinary mother: a mother who can enjoy the company of her older child and the family dog while she nurses the baby.<sup>8</sup> While Elizabeth Clinton was making a case for nursing as natural, Dutch Protestant leaders had been drawing an explicit connection between breastfeeding and piety. De Hooch’s painting can be read as a synthesis of these two cultural strands.

The maternal breast can’t of course be entirely separated from the erotic breast (at least not for the male viewer). This danger seems to me quite apparent, even urgent, in *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1520) painted by a follower of Leonardo da Vinci (plate 1). Here the Child holds a voluptuous

<sup>7</sup> *The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie* (Oxford, 1622) sig. C4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The painting by de Hooch, *Woman Nursing an Infant, with a Child* (1658–60), is reproduced and discussed by Marilyn Yalom in *A History of the Breast* (New York: Knopf, 1998) 92–93.



breast in his hands, but looks away rather furtively in the direction of the viewer. If the viewer is imagined as an adult male, then the Child here seems to be jealously protective of the mother's body, and especially of that part of her body which he considers his own. This is a religious painting, of course, but a painting which draws a particular kind of male gaze into the service of piety.



Plate 1. Follower of Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1520).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

As both verbal and visual texts imply, the mother's breast is providing more than physical nourishment. Because of the mother/child bonding associated with breastfeeding it seems natural that the breast should stand for emotional generosity of the kind referred to in early modern usages of the word 'charity.'<sup>9</sup> Spenser draws on this metonymic equation in Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, where Charissa, an allegorically named presence in the House of Holiness, exhibits the quality of her virtue through breastfeeding:

Her neck and breasts were ever open bare,  
That aye thereof her babes might suck their fill,<sup>10</sup>

This meaning of charity is exactly what Lady Macbeth has in mind when she alludes to "th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.15), a substance she hopes to transform by calling on spirits to supply themselves with "gall" by feeding on her "woman's breasts" (1.5.47-48).<sup>11</sup> Her words are shocking (and are meant to be) precisely because they strike out against a very powerful set of normative images and values: those referred to by Clinton, by Spenser, and by Lady Macbeth herself when she says: "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.54-55). The mother's breast, in short, provides not only nourishment but also love.

*Charity* by Lucas Cranach (plate 2) is an allegorical reconfiguration of breastfeeding. The maternal figure corresponds quite precisely to the image of Charissa in *The Faerie Queene*. Like Charissa, Cranach's Charity exposes her breasts so as to make them available to her youngest child; also like Charissa, she has older children who compete for attention, and who must at least be kept at bay. The yellow robe worn by Charissa, however, is no more than a transparent veil in Cranach. The effect of the painting as a whole is to situate Charity as a domestic virtue and to link it in various ways with woman's reproductive capacities. Perhaps it would be fair to say that for Cranach, as for Spenser and Shakespeare, not only does charity begin in the home, but it turns out to be largely women's work as well.

In early modern culture the practice of breastfeeding was of course inflected by class. Women of privilege, as Clinton's example underlines,

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the great encomium to charity in the King James translation of 1 Cor. 13, including the observation that "Charity suffereth long and is kind."

<sup>10</sup> *Books I and II of The Faerie Queene, The Mutability Cantos, and Selections from the Minor Poetry*, ed. Robert Kellogg and Oliver Steele (New York: Odyssey, 1965) 196.

<sup>11</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1316.

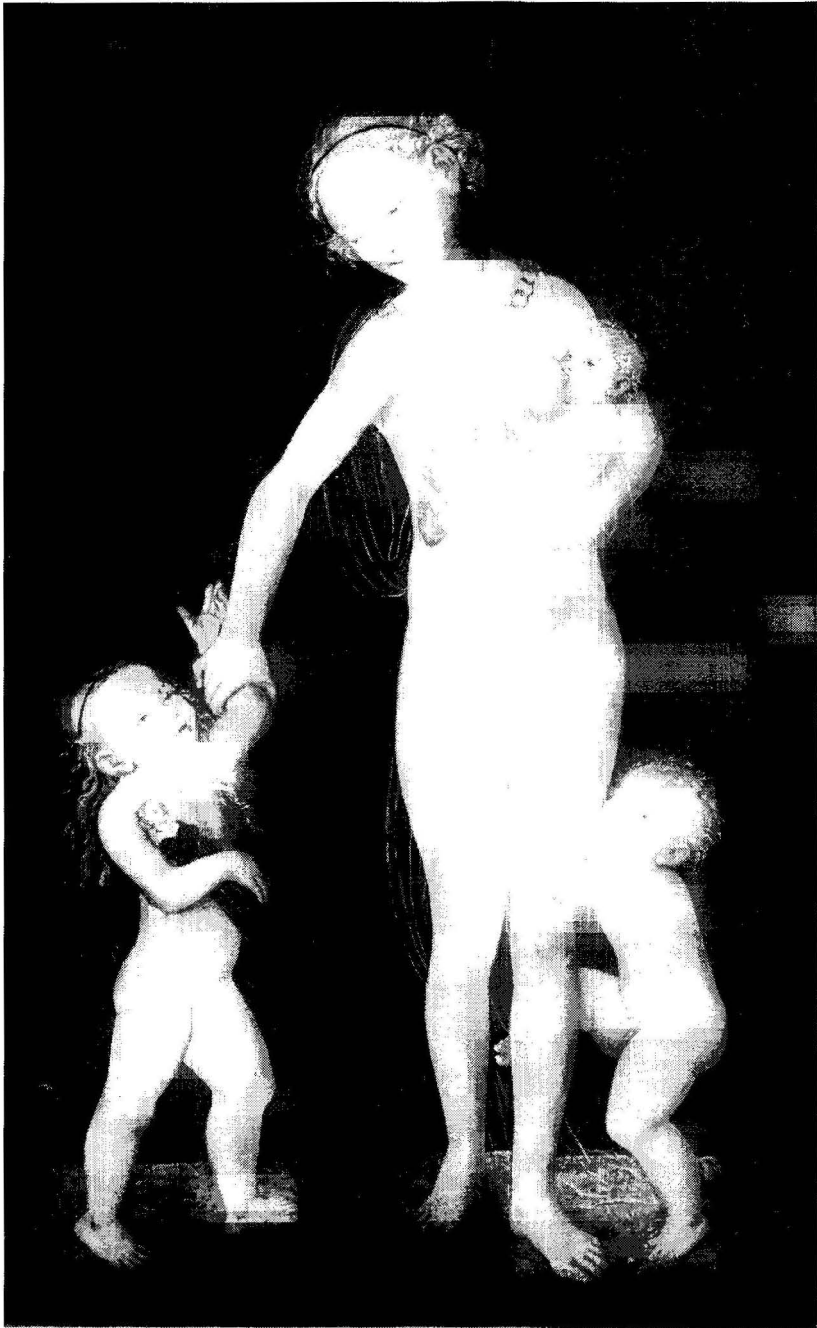


Plate 2. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Charity* (c. 1525).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

were discouraged from deploying their own breasts in this expenditure of care, or even forbidden to use them. The aristocratic breast was therefore preserved in its youthful poise and succulence for the delectation of the male patriarch. Wet nurses, recruited from the servant classes, were expected to provide milk in exchange for money and not to worry about distortions or distentions that might ensue. Clinton herself takes a very dim view of these arrangements. She calls on the women of her own class to resist the pressures to conform: “bee not *necessary* to that disorder of causing a *poorer women to banish her own infant*, for the entertaining of a *richer woman’s child*, as it were, bidding her *unlove her owne to love yours*” (sig. D2). It would be hasty to describe Clinton as an advanced egalitarian thinker on the basis of this one sentiment. But I think she deserves credit for having noticed, with dismay, that the female breast is an index of socio-economic difference within her society; and for having called on women to value themselves and their children at the expense of the entrenched hierarchy.

The six early modern readings of the breast which I have outlined fall quite readily into two groups. Pleasure, immodesty, and temptation are aspects of what we might call, following Marilyn Yalom, the *erotic* breast;<sup>12</sup> nurture, charity, and social inflection belong to the *maternal* breast.<sup>13</sup> These admittedly broad categories are useful as signposts that help us to interpret the semiology of the breast in early modern culture as a whole, and specifically in the portraiture of the period, to take a particularly telling example.



Most of the assumptions discernible in visual culture as a whole will appear in portraiture as well, though here they may be inflected somewhat differently by the demands of patronage and fashion. In general it would be fair to say that, in portraiture, women’s breasts are more likely to be emphasized and exposed in Catholic jurisdictions than among Protestants. This generalization holds true at the very top of the social scale, as a comparison between Raphael’s lovingly sensuous portrait of Joanna of Aragon in the Louvre (c. 1505) and the rather wooden rendering of Anne Boleyn in the

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<sup>12</sup> *A History* 49.

<sup>13</sup> These two larger categories overlap but are not identical with the *luxurious* breast and the *virtuous* breast as defined by Sue Wiseman in a suggestive study of eighteenth-century culture; see “From the Luxurious Breast to the Virtuous Breast: The Body Politic Transformed,” *Textual Practice* 11 (1997): 477–92.

National Portrait Gallery (c. 1530) would suggest. But it holds true as well further down the social scale, as a comparison between two famous images by Rubens and Rembrandt will demonstrate. *Le Chapeau de Paille* (plate 3) was painted by an artist who enjoyed the patronage of many of the Catholic princes of Europe. The sitter is thought to be Susanna Fourment, the elder sister of the woman who would become Rubens' second wife. Although tradition and nomenclature have emphasized an article of the sitter's clothing, I think it would be fair to say that her generous cleavage, so lovingly represented, has at least as much to do with the enduring status of this portrait.



Plate 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Le Chapeau de Paille* (c. 1622–25).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

Rembrandt, in his *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels* (plate 4), is perhaps more deeply invested in the erotic interpretation of his sitter than Rubens was. Hendrickje Stoffels had taken a job as Rembrandt's housekeeper in 1647, five years after the death of his wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh. In 1654 she was summoned to appear before the council of the Reformed Congregation on charges of "practising whoredom with the painter Rembrandt."<sup>14</sup> But whatever the erotic subtext here, the female breast is now represented only by the shadow suggesting the cleavage between two objects we can't see.



Plate 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels* (c. 1654).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

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<sup>14</sup> *Rembrandt by Himself*, ed. Christopher White and Quentin Buvelot (London: National Gallery Publications, 1999) 80.

The sitter in one final portrait, from the studio of Peter Lely, is thought to be Nell Gwyn (plate 5), famous both as a Restoration actress, and as the mistress of Charles II. If Reformation culture insisted on covering the female breast with appropriate decency, Nell Gwyn would seem to be announcing that the Reformation is over.



Plate 5. Studio of Sir Peter Lely, *Portrait of a Woman, Possibly Nell Gwyn* (c.1675). National Portrait Gallery, London.



So far all the breasts on display, both in visual and verbal texts, have been young and beautiful. This pleasant state of affairs is neither an accident nor a distortion. The humanist ideology so near the centre of Renaissance culture allowed for the celebration of the human body as the masterpiece of the created universe, and the female breast could therefore emerge as a conspicuous marker of the success of this achievement. But beautiful breasts, however normative in Renaissance displays, are also haunted by their parodic opposites, a phenomenon which I will describe here (following Bakhtin<sup>15</sup>) under the rubric of the grotesque.

The grotesque breast is always already there in humanist culture, at least if one knows where to look for it. It is women past their prime who are credited with revealing this phenomenon, especially if they are unwilling to renounce sexual desire. Erasmus, in the *Praise of Folly*, has Folly poke fun at lascivious “old women” as follows: “They’re forever smearing their faces with make-up, always looking in the mirror, and taking tweezers to their pubic hairs, exposing their sagging withered breasts and trying to rouse failing desire with their quavery whining voices, while they drink, dance among the girls, and scribble their little love-letters.”<sup>16</sup> This description makes it clear that the old breast is risible because it ventures into a context it can no longer occupy (at least according to the misogynist observer), namely the context of sexual attraction, seduction, and gratification. The visual counterpart of Erasmus’ verbal mockery is supplied by his friend, Quinten Massys, in the *Grotesque Old Woman* (plate 6). Here the woman’s breasts, however ravaged by time they may be, are nonetheless upstaged by the repugnant, ape-like face. The rhetoric has altered slightly, but the message is the same: old women who expose their breasts are only making fools of themselves.

The prominence of the grotesque old woman in the French literary culture of the Renaissance has been suggestively outlined and judiciously

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<sup>15</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968) 317.

<sup>16</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radici, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. A.H.T. Levi et al. (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1974–) 27: 106. In the original the passage reads as follows: “fucis assidue vultum oblinere, nusquam a speculo discedere, infamae pubis sylvam vellere, vie/tas ac putres ostentare mammas, tremuloque gannitu languentem sollicitare cupidinem, potitare, miscere puellarum choris, literulas amatorias scribere.” See *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. J.H. Waszink et al. (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company/Elsevier, 1969–2005) 4.3: 108.





Plate 6. Quinten Massys, *A Grotesque Old Woman* (c. 1525–30).  
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

qualified by Jacques Bailbé and Brenda Dunn-Lardeau.<sup>17</sup> Even at the risk of simplifying a very complicated range of textual material, I select here one poem by a single poet because of its pointed relationship to the question under review. “Epigram 78: Of the Ugly Breast” by the court poet Clément Marot is a pretty comprehensive exercise in revulsion. The poem is quite

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<sup>17</sup> See Jacques Bailbé, “Le Thème de la vieille femme dans la poésie satirique du seizième et du début du dix-septième siècles,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanism et Renaissance* 26 (1964): 98–119, and Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, “La Vieille Femme chez Marguerite de Navarre,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanism et Renaissance* 61 (1999): 375–98.

obviously an ironic blazon, paired as it is with "Epigram 77: Of the Beautiful Breast." The ugly breast has many of the predictable defects: it is "floppy" and "drooping"; it has "a great ugly black nipple" and it "wobbles" without provocation. But ugliness here is not so much ridiculous as disgusting:

Burned out breast, hanging breast,  
Withered breast, breast secreting  
Filthy slime instead of milk;  
It's the devil who makes you so ugly.<sup>18</sup>

The objective here is to reconfigure the apparently beautiful as loathsome. The breast therefore holds an equivocal position, especially in the semiology of the Reformation, official or unofficial. In *The Faerie Queene*, for example, the breast is lovely when offered (by Charissa) in the service of charity. But when the female character is called Duessa, and is therefore, by virtue of her duplicity itself, able to embody the vices of the Roman Catholic Church, she is subjected to a stripping exercise which reveals what we might already expect:

Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind,  
Hung down, and filthy matter from them welled. (1.8.47.6-7)

The female breast under these circumstances is a grotesque parody of its normative self within Renaissance literature and art. No longer the vehicle of erotic desire or of maternal nourishment, the breast is now imagined as a marker of demonic influence, and it is therefore given a full measure of whatever will make it repugnant.



To complicate the scenario I have been sketching in outline, I wish to introduce two digressions: one medical, the other theatrical. The medical literature of the time, as one might expect, makes frequent reference to the maternal breast. Treatises on midwifery, for example, list changes to the breasts as one of the early signs of pregnancy. Dr. John Sadler of Norwich

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<sup>18</sup> See "Epigramme 77: Du beau Tetin" and "Epigramme 78: Du laid Tetin" in Clément Marot, *Les Epigrammes*, ed. C.S. Mayer (London: The Athlone Press, 1970) 156-60. In the fragments translated and quoted above, the breast is described as "*flac*" and "*de drappeau*"; it has a "*grand vilain bout noir*"; it is said to "*brimballe*" incessantly. The four lines of English verse quoted above are my rendering of: "*Tetin grillé, Tetin pendant, / Tetin flestry, Tetin rendant / Villaine bourbe en lieu de laict, / Le Diable te fait bien si laid.*"

points out that after conception “the breasts swell and grow hard with some paine and pricking in them” and that “The nipples of the breasts wax red.”<sup>19</sup> The English translation of Jakob Rüff’s standard work, *The Expert Midwife*, makes the same observations.<sup>20</sup> There is in these manuals less information than one might expect on breastfeeding, though Ambroise Paré, as I will soon suggest, is an exception to this rule. Breast cancer seems to have been a fairly rare occurrence, and successful treatment of it even rarer. By the early seventeenth century the German physician Wilhelm Fabry was removing what he believed to be malignant tumours from women’s breasts and armpits, and in 1690 the Dutchman Adrian Helvétius performed the first “successful breast cancer surgery”<sup>21</sup> in France. It is of course tempting to see the early modern breast as a simpler and healthier phenomenon than its postmodern counterpart: less prone to the distortions of voyeurism and advertising, less vulnerable to disease, less subject to male manipulation and control. While I think there may be some truth to this image of a happier past, the evidence of medical history would suggest that many of the pressures of our own time are already in place or at least in formation, and a moment’s reflection on the likelihood of death due to childbirth should liberate us from the view that early modern women should be envied by their descendants of either gender.

The medical framing of the breast may produce unusual and perhaps unintended results, as in the extended commentary on breastfeeding offered by Ambroise Paré. Breastfeeding by the child’s own mother is the right and natural way to go, Paré argues. But doubtless fully aware that his aristocratic clients are going to do otherwise, he offers detailed advice on the selection of a wet nurse. She should be between 25 and 35 years of age, healthy, articulate, well-behaved, preferably of a darker complexion than the child’s mother (“as blackish or browne ground is more fertill than white; even so a browne woman hath more store of milke”<sup>22</sup>), and she must not be sexually promiscuous. The size and shape of her breasts are naturally of special interest to her prospective employer: “she ought to have a broad breast, and her dugges indifferently bigge, not slacke or hanging; but of a middle consistence, betweene soft and hard.” If in doubt, “You may by

<sup>9</sup> *The Sick Womans Private Looking-Glass* (London, 1636) sig. H1.

<sup>20</sup> *The Expert Midwife, or An Excellent and Most Necessary Treatise of the Generation and Birth of Man* (London, 1637) sig. N3<sup>v</sup>-4.

<sup>21</sup> Yalom, *A History* 217.

<sup>22</sup> *The Workes of that Famous Chirurghion Ambroise Parey*, trans. Th[omas] Johnson (London, 1634) sig. 4G4<sup>v</sup>.

touching try whether the flesh bee solid and firme," or you may examine the "swelling and blewnesse" of the veins that will be dispersed, like "rivelets," throughout the well-tempered breast (sig. 4G5).

Paré's imagined scenario here places the husband in the position of seeking out a wet nurse to relieve his already overburdened wife from the cares of breastfeeding. So the "you" who touches the job applicant's breasts to determine their firmness and who examines the veins for colour and size is of course male. If we suppress for a moment the outrage that would be demanded by the sexual harassment protocols of our own day, the situation borders on the comic. And in Paré's further account of unsuccessful nursing practice, we come perilously close to the realm of the grotesque. You don't want a nurse whose breasts are "great and hard," he says, because the child has to expend too much effort in sucking, and may eventually refuse to do so. Even worse, "by continuall sucking, and placing of his nose on the hard breast, it may become flat, and the nostrils turned upwards, to his great deformity, when hee shall come to age" (sig. 4G5). This image of the vulnerability of the nursing (male) child might be said to anticipate Freud, except that the child's tender spot is quite clearly a physical protrusion, not a psychological drive.

To give Paré his due, he knows that nurses can be vulnerable as well as children. When the child grows teeth, for example, there's a good chance that he'll "bite the nipple of the nurses breast," thus causing "an ulcer very contumacious and hard to be cured, because that the sucking of the childe, and the rubbing of the cloaths doe keep it alwaies raw" (sig. 4G6<sup>v</sup>). But Paré has a fix for this problem too. Soaking the bruised nipple in alum water will help, especially if it is then encased in a hat-shaped covering made of lead and provided with enough holes near the tip to allow for evacuation of milk "and also the fanious matter that commeth from the ulcers" (sig. 4G6<sup>v</sup>). The text is now interrupted in order to display three examples of these leaden hats (plate 7), in three different styles, no doubt to accommodate nipples of various shapes.

My second digression is concerned with the representation of the female breast in what is arguably the greatest artistic production of the Reformation, namely, the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. And here of course we encounter a paradox. No female breast was ever visible, even dimly or by indirection, in this theatrical environment, because all of the female parts were played by adolescent boys. This means that Lady Macbeth's famous unsexing speech, "Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers" (1.5.47–48), was spoken in the first instance by a boy actor of about fourteen. If he had breasts at all, they must have been prosthetic and well hidden by costume. Perhaps

*The figure of leaden Nipples to be put upon the Nipple or Teat of the Nurse  
when it is ulcerated.*

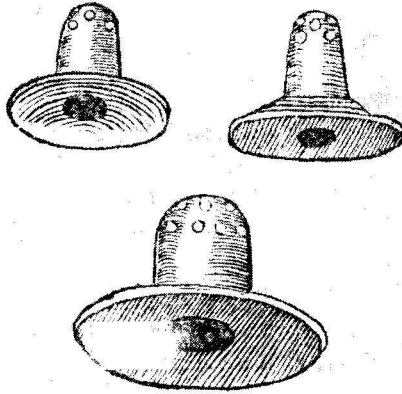


Plate 7. From *The Workes of that Famous Chirurgeon Ambroise Parey* (1634).  
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

this was of no concern, as theatre historians like to argue, in a production style that did not expect realism. But it seems to me that matters only get worse. What are we to make of the maternal imagery in Cleopatra's speech, "Peace, peace! / Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?" (5.2.308–10) True enough, this is metaphorical language: there is no baby, but only a stage property of some kind that represents the asp. Still, the language seems to remind us, rather forcefully, that there's also no breast, but just another stage property standing in for one. The tensions that create ambivalence in Shakespeare are no longer containable in a play like *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Here Vindice and Hippolito, having learned that their mother (Gratiana) has tried to sell their sister (Castiza) to the Duke's lecherous son (Lussurioso), berate their mother with contemptuous words and point their daggers at her breast. Gratiana defends herself by appealing to a version of the maternal:

Are you so barbarous, to set iron nipples  
Upon the breast that gave you suck? (4.4.5–6)<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The New Mermaids (London: A. & C. Black, 1991) 86.

Even without the knowledge that this mother is a boy in drag, it would be difficult to take her self-defence as anything other than grotesque. Like the leaden hats of medical discourse, the “iron nipples” of this speech provoke a response that makes an appeal to maternal care seem risible.

The discrepancy between language and performance seems to me even more painful in *Love's Sacrifice*, by John Ford. Here the female protagonist, Bianca, on hearing the accusation of adultery spoken by her husband, approaches him with suicidal recklessness. When told that she must prepare to die she says, “I do, and to the point / Of thy sharp sword with open breast I'll run / Halfway thus naked” (5.1.158–60).<sup>24</sup> This remains awkward no matter how much allowance we make for different staging conventions; a boy actor cannot tug at his bodice while speaking these lines without risking theatrical disaster. But we are now approaching the end of a long tradition in which women's parts are reserved for adolescent boys. Ford certainly was aware that in France women's roles were acted by women, and he had doubtless heard of (or even witnessed) Queen Henrietta Maria's controversial appearances in court theatricals. By the time he wrote this play (c. 1630), Ford may well have been looking forward to the day when women's bodies would be part of the theatrical dynamic. Still, it remains true that nothing like a woman's “open breast” could be put on display in the English theatre during the very period of its greatness. Protestant culture and luxuriant female display were not easily compatible, even in the theatre.



To prepare the way for some provisional conclusions, I offer one further text, “To a Friend for her Naked Breasts,” by Eliza. Nothing is known about the poet beyond what can be inferred from her single publication, *Eliza's Babes: or The Virgin's Offering*, a book of lyric poetry, most of it religious, followed by a sequence of prose meditations. Eliza's religious orientation would seem to have been towards puritanism, and she is definitely at home in the environment I have been designating as Reformation culture. While she's typical in many ways, Eliza also brings into focus perceptions that other texts occlude or ignore:

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<sup>24</sup> *Love's Sacrifice*, ed. A.T. Moore, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester U Press, 2002) 246.

Madam I praise you, 'cause you'r free,  
 And you doe not conceal from me  
 What hidden in your heart doth lye,  
 If I can it through your breasts spy.

Some Ladies will not show their breasts,  
 For feare men think they are undrest,  
 Or by't their hearts they should discover,  
 They do't to tempt some wanton Lover.

They are afraid tempters to be,  
 Because a Curse impos'd they see,  
 Upon the tempter that was first,  
 By an all-seeing God that's just.

But though I praise you have a care  
 Of that al-seeing eye, and feare,  
 Lest he through your bare breasts see sin,  
 And punish you for what's within.<sup>25</sup>

Eliza's most distinctive contribution to early modern discourse on the breast is the notion of voyeurism. The authors I have been quoting (and they are largely male authors, I should hasten to add) presume that women display their breasts with malice aforethought: male attention is exactly what they are seeking. Thus Henry Peacham observes that women will "shiver in the hardest frost, rather than they will suffer their bare necks and breasts to passe your eyes unviewed."<sup>26</sup> Eliza is not so sure of this putative intention. She praises her friend's freedom from inhibition, but she worries about what men will "think": namely, that bare breasts are by definition immodest, and that they offer an incitement to temptation. But what really worries Eliza is the cosmic voyeur, God himself, who can see "through your bare breasts" and discover "sin" in her friend's heart. Within Reformation culture, the ever-watchful eye of Providence turns out to be far less forgiving than the merely conjectural observations of mortal men.

My discussion here has been suggestive rather than definitive. Still, I now face the moment at which conclusions, however tentative, are called for. Let me finish then, by offering two of these. First, if there ever was that moment of uncomplicated humanism in which the body (and the female breast) could simply be celebrated, it seems to have been superseded very quickly by the anxieties of Reformation culture. Secondly, the repeated at-

<sup>25</sup> *Eliza's Babes: or The Virgin's Offering (1652): A Critical Edition*, ed. L.E. Semler (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U Press, 2001) 102–03.

<sup>26</sup> *The Worth of a Penny* (London, 1641) sig. D4.

tacks on exposure of the breast would seem to imply a degree of uncertainty about who ought to be in control of this controversial body part. Should it be the woman herself, whose knowledge of the limits of modesty would guide her in deciding what to reveal and what to conceal? Should it be the patriarchal head of the household whose judgement would impose limits in keeping with his dignity? Or should it be an admittedly jealous God, who ordains breastfeeding on the one hand, while discovering sin on the other, as if to remind us that his ways are, as always, past finding out?