Liquid Assets: A Brief History of Wet-Nursing
by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

A Sumerian lullaby from the third millennium B.C. provides the first written record of wet-nursing. As the wife of Shulgi, ruler of Ur, sings her son to sleep, she promises him first a wife and then a son—complete with wet nurse. "The nursmaid joyous of heart will suckle him." Some of these nurses were from privileged backgrounds, their status elevated by contact with tiny scions.

In ancient Egypt, wet nurses were recruited from the harems of senior officials and appeared on the guest lists for royal banquets. Less fortunate wet nurses were actually, or effectively, slaves, and not all lived under the supervision of the babies' parents. The substitution by nurses of one baby for another, the source of topsy-turvy merriment in Gilbert and Sullivan, was seen as serious enough in ancient Mesopotamia to be specifically proscribed in the code of Hammurabi (1700 B.C.).

By the second century A.D., wet-nursing in Europe was an organized commercial activity. In Rome, commerce in mother's milk took place in the vegetable market around particular columns called lactaria, where wet nurses for hire gathered. By medieval times, wet nurses—paid, indentured, or enslaved—could be found throughout Europe.

However, the "heyday of wet nursing" (as historian George Sussman refers to it) was eighteenth-century France. It had long been a practice among the elite for infants to be nursed in their own homes or in the nearby countryside by carefully chosen nurses producing plentiful milk. Such babies tended to survive as well as if nursed by their own mothers. A growing population of urban artisans and shopkeepers, along with a rapidly increasing foundling population of abandoned babies, expanded the demand for rural wet-nursing. For various reasons, demand for affordable wet nurses far outstripped their local availability.

Parents were forced to seek wet nurses farther afield. An itinerant entrepreneur known as a meneur would contract with rural women and then, shortly after an infant's birth, bring a prospective wet nurse to the parents' home to pick up her charge. The meneur—a cartload of babies in tow—would then lead the wet nurses and their new charges back to distant rural destinations. Instances of babies being lost along the way occasionally surface in police records for Lyon and Paris.

In 1780, Lt. Gen. Charles-Pierre LeNoir, head of the Paris police (whose job it was to monitor the referral bureaus used by parents to locate wet nurses) provided a startling statistic: only 1,000 of 21,000 babies born in Paris that year were nursed by their own mothers. Infant mortality rates during this period were appalling, and there was a direct relationship between how much parents paid a wet nurse and how likely her charge was to survive.

Whether the wet nurse was adequate or not, the consequences for the mother were the same. Freed from the "drudgery"—and contraceptive effects—of nursing, mothers ovulated again, often within months. During their prime reproductive years, some women gave birth annually, with such serious health consequences as chronic anemia and prolapsed uteruses. In privileged households, the beneficiaries were often the same husbands who had insisted on using a wet nurse in the first place. Without breaking prevailing norms against sex with a lactating wife, and at no physical cost to themselves, they produced an array of legal heirs.

Down the social scale, butchers and shopkeepers faced economic ruin without the help of their wives. Hiring a wet nurse was often a financial necessity. But even with a wife's help, couples could seldom afford—much less house—a choice nurse, so their infants were sent away, often to distant wet nurses. Many died. As in wealthier households, however, the production of babies was fast-paced: among the non-breast-feeding wives of butchers and silk makers in Lyon, French historian Maurice Garden documents one butcher's wife who had twenty-one children in twenty-four years.

The real losers in the system, apart from the babies, were the women whose options were truly awful to begin with. Desperate to make any kind of living, many poor rural mothers would farm out their own babies to even less fortunate women and then hire themselves out as wet nurses. Grim reminders of their plight persist in how-to manuals for selecting wet nurses. Many recommend a woman who has recently given birth but who will not be nursing any infant other than the one she is hired to care for. (In a letter from Renaissance Italy, the wife of a Florentine merchant lamented the survival of a servant girl's baby; the enterprising lady had hoped to offer the servant as a wet nurse to one of her husband's clients.)

A few destitute women managed to work the system to their advantage, after a fashion. In Russia, where scores of abandoned babies were deposited in the (usually lethal) imperial foundling hospitals in Saint Petersburg and Moscow—established by Catherine II to demonstrate how "European" Russia was—an unmarried woman might become pregnant, abandon the newborn at the hospital, and then hire herself out as a wet nurse. Like the mother of Moses, a tiny, lucky percentage (if anyone in this tragic network would be considered lucky) managed to convince or bribe employees to put them in charge of their own infants.
In eighteenth-century France, many poor mothers would give up their own babies and hire themselves out as wet nurses.

years—to intervene. And so it was that I once observed an aged and stiff twenty-pound female, assisted by another older female, wrest a wounded infant from the sharp-toothed jaws of a forty-pound male. The far stronger and healthier young mother watched from the sidelines. Just days before, the same young mother had made no effort to intervene when her infant fell from a jacaranda tree branch and was grabbed up by the male. Again, it was the old female who rushed to the rescue.

In the last weeks of pregnancy, langurs may respond to a usurping male by aborting rather than continuing to expend energy on a reproductive venture so unlikely to end well. Similar late-pregnancy variations on the Bruce effect have been reported for an odd assortment of large mammals, including wild horses. University of Nevada's Joel Berger, an animal behaviorist who studied wild horses in the Great Basin, watched what happens when one stallion successfully challenges another for possession of his harem. During the disruption following the changeover, 82 percent of the mares that had been impregnated in the last six months by the deposed stallion aborted their fetuses.

Infanticide, abortion, cannibalism, these are altogether natural lapses from imagined “natural laws.” Why is it only in the last two decades that researchers have begun to view such behaviors as other than aberrations? Opinions, even scientific ones, are often influenced by received wisdom. As late as the 1960s, when animal behaviorists set up labs to study the maternal activities of rats, monkeys, and dogs, the categories devised to describe their behavior took for granted that mothers were instinctively nurturing. In her pioneering studies of dogs, for example, com-
For most mammals, the art of reproduction is to survive poor conditions and breed again under better ones.

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cross her life course, both a mother and her circumstances are constantly changing—as she ages, finds a new mate, loses a potential helper, stockpiles fat. In a world of leisure, plenty, and supportive social groups or in realms where offspring cost their parents little to rear, trade-offs fade from view. In contrast, overpopulation, social oppression, scarcity, bad times—none of these have ever been conducive to the development of the sort of mother characterized in Marge Piercy’s poem “Magic mama” as “an aphid enrolled to sweeten the lives of others. The woman who puts down her work like knitting the moment you speak.”

Real mamas must not only be magic but also multifaceted. Motherhood is more than all the licking, tending, suckling, and awe-inspiring protectiveness for which mother mammals are so justly famous. Such indeed is the art—and the tragedy—of iteroparity: offspring born at one time may be more costly to a mother or less viable than offspring born at another. Far from invalidating biological bases for maternal behavior, the extraordinary flexibility in what it means to be a mother should merely remind us that the physiological and motivational underpinnings of an archetypically prochoice mammal are scarcely new.