

Wet-Nursing in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*: A Document of Social History

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A wet nurse, "a woman who is hired to suckle and nurse another woman's child" (*OED*), was a common figure in nineteenth-century England. Women of the upper and middle classes employed wet nurses for physical or fashionable reasons.¹

Dickens depicts this foster mother in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), in which a mother dies at the birth of an expected infant, and a wet nurse is employed. Here the wet-nursing custom and practice is described in surprisingly realistic detail. It can be said that this novel provides a rich source of information about the wet-nursing system. Moreover, its descriptions of wet-nursing are not only very detailed but also correspond to and support the discussions about wet-nursing at the time. It sometimes backlights the system and reveals unreasonable feelings toward a wet nurse not found in medical journals. As a document of social history, *Dombey and Son* helps to build up a picture of the wet-nursing practice in the society of mid-nineteenth century England.

In 1842, four years before the publication of the first installment of Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, William Ewart Gladstone was told about the wrongs of hiring a wet nurse: "Locock [an accoucheur] spoke to me of the 'frightful' mortality among the children of wet nurses: and said the way was to make them put out their own child to a nurse" (*Gladstone Diaries* Vol. III 239). At that time Gladstone was hiring a wet nurse for his second baby, Agnes, because his wife had trouble breast-feeding. Contrary to his expectations that hiring a wet nurse for a few days would be sufficient, his wife's trouble continued. When Gladstone and his wife had to de-

¹ On the history of wet-nursing, see Valerie A. Fildes's works.

cide "whether hand will do or whether a nurse must be had" (247), they chose "hand," that is artificial feeding, according to a doctor's recommendation.

While "the peak popularity of wet nurses was reached towards the end of the eighteenth century" (Wickes 418), in the first half of the nineteenth century, hiring a wet nurse was still a common custom in England among wealthy people. And the implications of hiring a wet nurse, as related to Gladstone by his accoucheur, were sensed by people. As a wealthy middle-class diarist wrote with melancholy reflection in 1848, it was a custom with which the child of a well-to-do family "should be sustained, as it were, at the expense of the life of another infant" (qtd. in Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 192).²

It was quite natural for doctors to accuse wealthy women by linking the custom of hiring wet nurses to the high death-rate of nurses' children. In 1850 Dr. Webster made a report entitled "Remarks on the Health of London during the six months ending the 30th of last March":

...from the want of breast-milk, thirty-nine infants are stated to have died during the same quarter; whilst, in the two previous years, 1848 and 1849, it is reported, that 347 infants died from the same cause. Such a large mortality from the want of breast-milk, the author thought mainly arose from the objectionable practice so prevalent among the upper and middle ranks in this country, of employing wet nurses, instead of following the true dictates of nature, which enjoin each mother to suckle her own offspring, as this is alike beneficial to parent as to child. Besides, it should be also remembered, that in consequence of the former

² There was a good chance that the nurse's child would survive if the baby was fed out at the nurse's house like in France. For example, Madame Bovary puts her little girl to nurse with the carpenter's wife in the same village. See Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857) Part II, chap. 3. In Britain, on the other hand, by the nineteenth century, "wet nurses were increasingly expected to be resident in the child's home" (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 190).

unnatural proceedings, the hired nurse's own infant being generally fed by hand or neglected, it very frequently thus falls a sacrifice to lucre and fashion. (*Lancet* 513)

The accusation was aimed at mothers who would not suckle their infants in order to suit their own social life. Perhaps a lot of mothers were concerned about retaining personal beauty. After Dr. Webster's report, around 1860, the moral disadvantages of the employment of a wet nurse were vigorously discussed in medical journals.³ Physicians accused wealthy mothers who were physically capable of breast-feeding their babies but would not do so for reasons of fashion.

Naturally there are always mothers who cannot nurse their children even if they want to do so. What happened to children whose mothers' milk was insufficient or whose mothers had died at birth? If people accused mothers of hiring wet nurses, did doctors recommend hand-feeding as had Gladstone's accoucheur? In most cases, they did not. Despite their criticisms of the practice of hiring wet nurses, they advocated it in particular circumstances. Dr. Webster admitted there were cases in which employing other people should be permitted. He said, "in very particular cases and where the mother is totally unable to afford sufficient nourishment to her own infant" (*Lancet* 513), employing others should be sanctioned. When a mother died during or soon after childbirth, or when a mother had insufficient breast milk or had breast trouble, hiring a wet nurse was not criticized. Though Gladstone's doctor recommended hand-feeding, most doctors flinched at the idea of hand-feeding. The reason for this was clearly the high death-rate of hand-fed children.

According to Valerie A. Fildes, artificial feeding "had been practiced in and since antiquity. Numbers of feeding vessels have been found in infant graves from 4000 BC onwards ..." (Fildes, *Breasts* 262). But until well into the nineteenth century, medical writers regarded artificial feeding as the last resort among the alternatives to maternal breast-feeding. In 1748 William Cadogan, whose theories influenced subsequent doctors,

³ See Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 191-92.

wrote: "dry-nursing I look upon to be the most unnatural and dangerous Method of all; and, according to my Observation, not one in three survives it" (28).⁴ He definitely preferred wet-nursing to dry-nursing and gave detailed directions on selecting a wet nurse. Cadogan's view on the order of priority of infant feeding was preserved throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. According to David Forsyth, "In the early part of the nineteenth century hand-feeding, we are told, was fatal in London to at least seven out of eight children. Later still, Marshall Hall, 'who made a point of ascertaining the mortality among dry-nursed children,' stated that it amounted to seven in ten" (129-30). In 1854 Charles West lectured on rearing a young infant by hand. And though he morally observed that "by the sacrifice of the infant of the poor woman, the offspring of the wealthy will be preserved" (538), he never favored hand-feeding over wet-nursing. Andrew Combe, in *The Management of Infancy* (1840), wrote as follows:

Although the infant ought, if possible, to be brought up at the breast as already described, it sometimes happens that the mother is utterly unable for the duty, and that a suitable nurse is not to be had. In such circumstances no resource is left but to rear the child by the hand, as it is called, or artificial nursing. (121)

Many doctors considered artificial feeding as the last resort.⁵ When maternal breast-feeding was not available, the next priority definitely went to wet-nursing. On the whole, people who could afford a wet nurse did not choose hand-feeding at the risk of their infant's life.

Gladstone's case was an exceptional one in which a righteous man followed the righteous advice of a doctor. Luckily Gladstone's daughter seemed to thrive on ass's milk. The success, however, depended ironically upon the fact that he was wealthy and could privately obtain an ass and fresh milk in the country. His baby must have been dry-nursed with ut-

⁴ Cadogan's work was popular and went to at least 11 editions in English and French between 1748 and 92. See Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 113-14.

⁵ See also Bull 293.

most care. By contrast, in the city it was difficult to get fresh milk daily, and to impress upon people the need for perfect cleanliness was no easy task. These circumstances made doctors hesitate to recommend hand-feeding as an alternative to maternal breast-feeding.

How do Dickens's novels reflect this infant feeding situation? The fact that wet-nursing custom was repeatedly criticized means that not a small number of mothers among the upper and middle classes hired wet nurses. Dickens, who was sensitive to contemporary social customs, might have dealt with the wet-nursing custom in his novels. It could easily have become a target of his criticism. Yet, contrary to this expectation, he is reticent about the matter. Indifferent to fashionable mothers of the age, Dickens depicts middle-class mothers who never fail to breast-feed their infants. In *David Copperfield*, which is set in the 1820s and 1830s, for example, David's mother breast-feeds her new baby. When David Copperfield returns from school for the holidays, he sees his mother breast-feeding her new baby. "She was sitting by the fire, suckling an infant, whose tiny hand she held against her neck. Her eyes were looking down upon its face, and she sat singing to it" (94; ch. 8). To this scene Dickens attached an illustration. Though the scene illustrates David's feeling of being deprived of his own mother, the scene of maternal breast-feeding itself produces the atmosphere of warmth Dickens must have intended. Mrs. Micawber is another mother seen breast-feeding in *David Copperfield*. In *Dombey and Son*, Mrs. Skewton, who was accused by her daughter of depriving her of her childhood, justifies herself on her deathbed: "'For I nursed you!'" (673; ch. 41). Mrs. Skewton is especially proud of her breast-feeding because in her aristocratic social class it was quite common to hire a wet nurse. Though Dickens does not openly criticize the wet-nursing custom, he seems to make an implicit attack on the custom by praising breast-feeding mothers and ignoring those who employ wet nurses.

Despite his favoring maternal breast-feeding, there are certainly hand-fed children in Dickens's novels. They all belong to the lower class. In *Great Expectations*, Pip, whose parents died when he was an infant, is

raised by his sister, a blacksmith's wife, by hand.⁶ His sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, "had established a great reputation with herself and the neighbours because she had brought [him] up 'by hand'" (39; ch. 2). It is precisely because of the difficulty in hand-feeding that Pip's sister is so much praised for her success in raising him by hand. Oliver Twist is another child who is brought up by hand. He was born in the workhouse, and his mother died at birth. Parish authorities managing the workhouse asks if there is any female in the workhouse who can provide Oliver with "the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need. The workhouse authorities replied ... that there was not" (4; ch. 2). Upon this Oliver is sent out for notorious baby-farming, where children are raised by hand with indifferent care.⁷ Though Oliver's circumstances are far worse than Pip's, Oliver manages to survive. It is notable that, even in the workhouse, when mother's milk was unavailable, the alternative sought first was wet-nursing. Though Dickens did not want his middle-class mothers to employ wet nurses, he seemed to share the contemporary doubt about dry-nursing and preferred wet-nursing.

Dombey and Son, a contemporary novel, reflects the social consensus of the difficulty in and the distrust in artificial feeding. When Mr. Dombey, a wealthy middle-class merchant, is left with a new-born son after the death of his wife, his sister, Mrs. Chick, says, "It would have occurred to most men ... that poor dear Fanny being no more ... it becomes necessary to provide a Nurse" (62; ch. 2).⁸ For Mrs. Chick, and for most men, so she believes, the alternative to mother's milk should un-

⁶ *Great Expectations* is not a contemporary novel. Dating the story, Anny Sadrin asserts that "Pip must have been born with the century or slightly earlier and that he was Dickens's senior by 'about' ten years" (42). This means that hand-feeding was still more dangerous.

⁷ See Fildes's *Wet Nursing* on baby-farming (193-97).

⁸ Here the word "Nurse" clearly refers to a wet-nurse. Though Dickens uses the word "wet nurse" in his working notes to *Dombey and Son*, he prefers the "nurse" in the novel. The "wet nurse" is used only once by Susan Nipper (78; ch. 3).

questionably be human milk.

Her husband does not seem to be included in "most men" because he suggests an alternative, which surprises and incenses his wife. Mr. Chick, seeing his brother-in-law having difficulty in selecting a wet nurse, suggests, "'Couldn't something temporary be done with a teapot?'" (63; ch. 2). Here, "a teapot" is an allusion to a milk pot which was used to hand-feed. Hugh Smith, who was among the first to prefer hand-feeding to wet-nursing, wrote in Letter IX of *Letters to Married Women* (1768) that "I have contrived a milk pot for my own nursery.... This pot is somewhat in form like an urn; it contains a little more than a quarter of a pint; its handle and neck or spout, are not unlike those of a coffee-pot ..." (140). Mr. Chick's proposal seems to be a reasonable one when hand-feeding is being practiced anyway and immediate nourishment is needed for the long-wished-for heir to survive. But unexpectedly this suggestion makes his wife very angry:

After looking at him [Mr. Chick] for some moments in silent resignation, Mrs Chick said she trusted he hadn't said it in aggravation, because that would do very little honour to his heart. She trusted he hadn't said it seriously, because that would do very little honour to his head. As in any case, he couldn't ... hope to offer a remark that would be a greater outrage on human nature in general, she would beg to leave the discussion at that point. (63; ch. 2)

Though Mr. Chick suggested hand-feeding only as a temporary solution, until Mr. Dombey could settle on a wet nurse, the very thought of hand-feeding was too repulsive for Mrs. Chick. For her anyone who suggested hand-feeding never seriously wanted the baby to survive. Her anger reflects the real or supposed high death-rate from hand-feeding. Though Gladstone's sense of reason overcame the fear of hand-feeding, for some people hand-feeding seems to have been out of the question.

In Dombey's situation, doctors would sanction hiring a wet nurse without reserve despite being critical of mothers who would not suckle their own children. Dickens seems to have been cautious not to incur the

disapproval of moralistic people. He clearly does not intend to join in the wet-nursing debate.

Dombey's son, Paul, needs a wet nurse as soon as possible. How do the Dombey's find a wet nurse? Miss Tox, a friend of Mrs Chick's, "posted off [her]self to the Queen Charlotte's Royal Married Females" (64; ch. 2). This alludes to Queen Charlotte's Lying-in Hospital, which was described as follows in 1885:

Although not one of the objects of the Charity, it has long been customary to provide facilities for ladies requiring wet nurses to obtain them at the Hospital on payment of a small fee. Many ladies are accommodated with wet nurses in the course of the year, and the Hospital is in this way a great convenience.⁹

Polly Toodle is recommended by the matron of the hospital. Miss Tox visits the Toodles at their house to inspect in advance. She finds the place very clean and the Toodles wholesome and decides to take them with her to the Dombey's for inspection. Miss Tox takes with her not only the applicant herself but all the family members, including Mr. Toodle, their five children, and Polly's sister, Jemima. This would appear to be a slightly strange arrangement, but, as we shall see later, this accorded with the custom.

At the Dombey's Mrs Chick "enter[s] into a close private examination of Polly, her children, her marriage certificate, testimonials, and so forth" (66; ch. 2). Here most of the requirements are compactly mentioned.

First and naturally an applicant for the position of wet nurse should be carefully examined. "[A] close private examination of Polly," which naturally includes a physical examination, is not detailed in the novel. But we can imagine the details of the physical examination would accord with a doctors' advice for selecting a wet nurse.

Medical texts gave careful instructions as to how to choose a wet nurse. Andrew Combe, for example, in his medical advice book devotes a

⁹ T. Ryan, *Queen Charlotte's Lying-in Hospital from its Foundation in 1752 to the Present Time*, (London, 1885), 42. qtd. in Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 194-95.

chapter titled "On the Choice and Regimen of a Nurse" to describing the way to examine the wet nurse applicant. The requisites influencing a doctor's decision are:

sound health, a good constitution, and freedom from any hereditary taint; moderate plumpness, a fresh and clear complexion, clear cheerful eyes, with well-conditioned eyelids, deep red-coloured lips without crack or scurf, sound white teeth, and well-formed moderately firm breasts, with nipples free from soreness or eruption. (115)

To check up on the quantity and the quality of the milk, physicians of course examined the milk itself. Combe mentions another important standard which influenced a doctor's judgment:

Of both the quantity and the quality of the milk we may form an opinion by examining the condition of the nurse's own child — whether it is plump and healthy, or the reverse... upon the whole, the surest test is that afforded by the state of the nurse's child. If we find it healthy, active, good-natured, and neatly kept, we have one of the surest tests of the qualities of the nurse. (115-16)

This is why Polly's children were invited. They were all apple-faced and healthy-looking. Their appearance testified to the quality and quantity of Polly's milk. After Polly's inspection, Mrs. Chick went with "her report to her brother's room, and as an emphatic comment on it, and corroboration of it, carried the two rosiest little Toodles with her" (66; ch. 2). Before meeting the wet nurse herself, Mr. Dombey sees the children and acknowledges the appropriateness of the applicant, saying "'These children look healthy ...'" (67; ch. 2). Both Mrs. Chick and Mr. Dombey decide to hire Polly at this moment. This clearly shows that children of a wet nurse were generally thought as "one of the surest tests."

Concerning the age of the milk, Combe observes that "it is desirable that both mother and nurse should have been delivered nearly about the same date, because the quality of the milk alters with the lapse of time" (111). Thomas Bull's opinion was the same: "nearer the birth of the child, and the delivery of its foster parent, the better ..." (285). Cadogan was

less insistent about the coincidence of the birth date and the delivery date: he advised selecting a woman who was newly lactating, ideally having given birth herself within two or three months (30). Since Polly has delivered her youngest child six weeks before, her milk is suitable enough for the new-born Paul. Apropos of children, medical writers specified that ideally, wet nurses should have had two or more children so that they had some knowledge of childcare (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 194). Bull observes that "the woman who has had one or two children before is always to be preferred, as she will be likely to have more milk, and may also be supposed to have acquired some experience in the management of infants" (286). Because Polly has five children, she has enough experience in infant care.

While the physical characteristics of the nurse were considered to be of great importance, her emotional qualities were considered vital to the well-being of the child she nursed: "A tranquil mind and even temper are particularly desirable in a nurse, and care should be taken to inquire into this point" (Combe 113). Combe cites a case in which an excited mother killed her healthy infant instantly by suckling (115). Bull mentions "the injurious influence of mental disturbance on the breast-milk" (287). In 1859 the effect of emotion on milk was stated as follows:

A burst of rage, a passion of grief, a sudden emotion that passes off like a shadow from the mother, and leaves her unchanged, produces so marked an effect on the milk as seriously to prejudice the health of the infant during many days and weeks. ("Wet-Nurses from the Fallen" 114)

Polly revealed no emotional excitement at the inspection and she was accepted as a quite self-composed woman. But when parting from her family, she cries a lot: "Mrs Chick, who had her matronly apprehensions that this indulgence in grief might be prejudicial to the little Dombey ('acid, indeed,' she whispered Miss Tox), hastened to the rescue" (72; ch. 2). This temporal agitation did not stand against Polly, though.

Concerning the moral characteristics of the wet nurse, there was a prevailing belief in the nineteenth century that moral or temperamental characteristics could be transmitted from the nurse to the child through

the breast milk. Though Combe and Bull do not mention this belief, even in 1859 C. H. F. Routh observed as follows:

Now when a woman suckles a child she undoubtedly communicates to it the distillation, as it were, of the vital essences of her own blood; and thus it is that if a nurse of confirmed vicious and passionate habits suckles a child, that child is in danger of having its own morality tainted likewise. (580)

Some doctors thought that human milk was made from blood, and that character failings were conveyed through it. Human milk is in fact made from blood, and some diseases are suspected to be transmitted through breast milk now. One of the greatest fears for middle-class people in the nineteenth century was of working-class pollution through the medium of breast milk. A passage from *Dombey and Son* shows this anxiety and sense of relief: "Little Paul, suffering no contamination from the blood of the Toodles, grew stouter and stronger every day" (100; ch. 5).

The fear of contamination from working-class blood is especially strong in *Dombey*. As we saw earlier, Mrs. Chick takes it for granted that they should hire a wet nurse for the bereaved child. *Dombey* also knows that he has to decide on someone to secure the life of his heir and his Company, but he is reluctant to do so. He seems to have rejected several candidates. His reluctance comes partly from his humiliation at having to rely on "a hired serving-woman" (67; ch. 2). He is too self-reliant and proud to rely on someone else. Yet, circumstances now dictate that he no longer be so irresolute. Moreover, Polly Toodle appears to be without flaw. Still, his reluctance lingers. Seeing the healthy children Mrs. Chick brought, he worries his son will develop some relationship with the wet nurse's children:

'These children look healthy,' said Mr Dombey. 'But my God, to think of their some day claiming a sort of relationship to Paul!'

'Oh! But what relationship is there!' Louisa began—

'Is there!' echoed Mr Dombey, who had not intended his sister to participate in the thought he had unconsciously expressed. 'Is there, did you say, Louisa!'

'Can there be, I mean.'

'Why none,' said Mr Dombey, sternly. 'The whole world knows that, I presume.' (67; ch. 2; Dickens's italics)

Dombey cannot stand the idea of Paul and Polly's children being foster brothers. Milk bondage, for Dombey, seems to establish so intimate a relationship that he imagines that he will become a relative of the working-class family, and that they will make claims to his fortune in the future.

Dombey not only fears the establishment of some relationship between the children, but also is caught by almost unrealistic imagination: "Her infant was a boy too. Now, would it be possible for her to change them?" (71; ch. 2). Gerhard Joseph argues that "Dickens was the preeminent nineteenth-century example of the novelist who assimilated the world of fairy and fairy tale into the realistic novel, and his adaptation of the fairy changeling is a further instance of such assimilation" (187). However, Dombey's fear is not without foundation in relation to wet-nursing. In the seventeenth century, the French obstetrician, Jacques Guillemeau, objected to wet-nursing partly because the child might be switched and another put in its place.¹⁰ Formerly, when babies were nursed at the nurse's house, this was a reasonable fear, but because Dombey has a resident wet nurse supervised by his sister and himself, he is suffering a kind of delusion. Rather, it is Dombey's fear of the working-class which causes him to conceive of such a wild idea.

Mrs. Chick's examination of Polly includes the inspection of the marriage certificate and testimonials. The reason why the marriage certificate was required is that respectable married women were preferred as wet nurses. But "such women were rarely prepared to leave their husband and family for up to a year in order to suckle another woman's child, however good the pay and conditions.... By the mid-nineteenth century, young single women who had 'fallen' were more commonly employed" (Fildes, *Wet*

¹⁰ Ian G. Wickes, "History of Infant Feeding," in *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, Vol. 28 (1953), 232. Guillemeau's work was translated into English in 1612.

Nursing 191-92). To work as a wet nurse and get a good wage, unmarried women left their infants in the care of baby-farmers, who often left children to die. Thus around 1860 the controversy over the fate of discarded children was a heated one. The moral disadvantages of employing a wet nurse were vigorously discussed in newspapers and medical journals. Polly's infant, however, is hand-fed by Polly's sister and survives, a situation which would not have provoked public opinion.

In addition to the marriage certificate, Polly presented testimonials to Mrs. Chick. Who gave her those testimonials is not clear. In France, a wet-nursing industry was highly organized and there were rules for qualifying a wet nurse. A potential nurse had to obtain a license to wet-nurse from the local mayor or the parish priest (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 222; Fildes, *Breasts* 177). In Britain, on the other hand, there were no organized rules for employing a wet nurse. Combe advised that, "The choice of a nurse ought never to be finally decided upon without the sanction of a well-qualified physician, whose duty it is to inquire and examine carefully into the state of her health" (115). This comment implies that physicians could give authoritative judgment and recommendation of the wet nurse. There were others who could give testimonials. Fildes cites a nurse's certificate issued by an inspector in Hertfordshire in the eighteenth century (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 178). From the nature of the job it is natural to suspect that wet nurses of Britain were also required to present some kind of testimonials or recommendations from the authorities. Because Polly was recommended by the Lying-in hospital, her testimonials probably included a recommendation from the institution.

Apart from her excessive grief at the parting from her family, itself a natural expression of feelings, on the whole Polly is physically and morally an ideal wet nurse. She seems to be quite an agreeable choice who meets medical recommendations.

After seeing Polly's children and making up his mind to choose Polly, Mr. Dombey invites Polly and her stoker husband, Mr. Toodle, to his room. According to Shari L. Thurer, "The baby's father bargained not with the wet nurse for her services, but with the nurse's husband, and the

two men ultimately agreed on a fair price" (127-28). Since Thurer's description is about the middle-ages, it does not testify that this custom remained in Victorian England. So it is not clear whether Mr. Dombey conformed to the custom or not. But in an age when the husband was entitled to all of his wife's property, and had almost complete control over his wife's body, it was natural for him to bargain over the value of the property with the customer.¹¹ In reality, however, Mr. Toodle is far from being his wife's owner. He depends on his wife for everything. Even when asked to express his opinion about the conditions imposed on Polly by Dombey, he hardly says anything meaningful. His vagueness is such that the patriarchal Dombey becomes irritated and in the end leaves monry arrangement to Mrs. Chick and Polly.

Dombey's conditions are threefold. The first is to rename Polly:

'So far as I can tell, you seem to be a deserving object. But I must impose one or two conditions on you, before you enter my house in that capacity. While you are here, I must stipulate that you are always known as—say as Richards—an ordinary name, and convenient.' (67; ch. 2)

This is a strange condition. No one recommends renaming a wet nurse. For Dombey, who detests any contact with the working class, to make Polly take on a different family name means to distance her from her family. His expectation is obvious from the second condition he imposes on Polly:

'Now, Richards, if you nurse my bereaved child, I wish you to remember this always. You will receive a liberal stipend in return for the discharge of certain duties, in the performance of which, I wish you to see as little of your family as possible.' (68; ch. 2)

To rename Polly is to remove her nominally from the lower class. To prohibit her from seeing her family is to remove her physically from the

¹¹ Blackstone states that "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing ..." (Vol. 1. 441; Blackstone's italics).

lower class, a relationship with which Dombey abhors.

Polly's being forbidden from meeting her family reminds us of the taboo against a nursing mother having sexual intercourse. People feared that intercourse might poison a nursing mother's milk. Pregnancy was still more hazardous to the infant. Hugh Smith warns that "she [the wet nurse] may be induced, by the advantage she gains, to conceal her being again with child, and continue to suckle the infant till it pines away, and dies for want of proper nourishment" (79). Fildes argues that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the belief that nursing mothers should abstain from sex was very much attenuated (*Breasts* 104-05; 121). Linda Pollock, on the other hand, argues that even in the nineteenth-century "it was believed that women who were feeding should abstain from sex, on the grounds that intercourse curdled the milk, and that if the mother became pregnant her milk supply would dry up" (53). Even if this taboo had been generally denied by the mid-nineteenth century, it probably remained at the back of people's mind.

Prohibiting her from meeting her family, Dombey, on the other hand, orders her to forget the nursing child after he is weaned:

'When those duties cease to be required and rendered, and the stipend ceases to be paid, there is an end of all relations between us.... You have children of your own,' said Mr Dombey. 'It is not at all in this bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child need become attached to you. I don't expect or desire anything of the kind. Quite the reverse. When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting: and will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please, to remember the child.' (68; ch. 2)

Polly, who is very fond of children, is a little offended at these words. In fact "Some nurses were offered a post as dry nurse or nursemaid once their suckling duties were completed..." (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 196). Moreover "a nurse employed by the wealthier members of society could frequently look forward to continuing concern and care from her employer

and/or foster child when her suckling duties were completed. Gifts in later life or in wills were not infrequent, and the provision of housing and sometimes a pension were not confined to royal nurses" (Fildes, *Breasts* 162). But this is not a sentiment shared by Mr. Dombey. He regards a wet nurse as nothing but "a hired serving-woman" and avoids establishing any other relationship with her. The fact that he gives her an ordinary name is related to this condition, too. The more ordinary the name is, the easier it is to forget. Yet despite his cautiousness Dombey's son, Paul, at his deathbed wants to see his wet nurse. In a sense, Polly's foster child treats her like a family member.

Polly (and Mr. Toodle) accepts Dombey's conditions and the "terms were ratified and agreed upon between Mrs. Chick and Richards" (71; ch. 2). The exact fee is not mentioned, but it was "a liberal stipend" (68; ch. 2). According to Fildes, "The pay was high. It compared favourable with other available work for women, particularly that of domestic servants." The conditions were also good: "plenty of food and drink, a clean and comfortable room of her own, and 'extras' such as the provision of tea and sugar were provided in addition to the weekly wage" (Fildes, *Wet Nursing* 196).

Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox emphasize this pleasant condition to Polly:

'As to living, Richards, you know,' pursued Mrs Chick, 'why, the very best of everything will be at your disposal. You will order your little dinner every day; and anything you take a fancy to, I'm sure will be as readily provided as if you were a Lady.'

'Yes to be sure!' said Miss Tox, keeping up the ball with great sympathy. 'And as to porter! — quite unlimited, will it not, Louisa?'

'Oh, certainly!' returned Mrs Chick in the same tone. 'With a little abstinence, you know, my dear, in point of vegetables.'

'And pickles, perhaps,' suggested Miss Tox.

'With such exceptions,' said Louisa, 'she'll consult her choice entirely, and be under no restraint at all, my love.' (72-73; ch. 2)

Doctors gave careful directions with regard to the diet which a wet nurse

should take. Eighteenth-century writers indeed recommended porter as nourishing. Cadogan permitted "small beer" (31), and the author of the *Nurse's Guide* (1729) devoted three pages to the praise of malt drink because "it produces a great deal of Milk" (36). In the nineteenth century, however, some medical writers opposed the use of it: "The custom which prevails too much in England, of allowing nurses large quantities of strong malt liquor, is injurious to the health and temper of the nurse, and still more so to the infant whom she is suckling" (Combe 117). Bull objected to "a prevailing notion...that porter tends to produce a great flow of milk:"

In consequence of this prejudice, the wet nurse is often allowed as much as she likes; a large quantity is in this way taken, and, after a short time, so much febrile action excited in the system, that, instead of increasing the flow of milk, it diminishes it greatly. Sometimes, without diminishing the quantity, it imperceptibly, but seriously, deteriorates its quality. (288)

With regard to food, Cadogan advised that "her Food should consist of a proper Mixture of Flesh and Vegetables: She should eat one hearty Meal of Flesh-meat every Day, with a good deal of Garden-stuff, and Bread" (30-31). As for vegetables, contrary to the abstinence recommended by the *Dombey* women, physicians advised the taking of them. In general, contrary to the common prejudice in favor of the wet nurse eating well, a simple diet was recommended by doctors: "the best supply of healthy milk is to be derived, not from a concentrated and highly nutritious diet, but rather from one consisting of a due proportion of mild vegetable, farinaceous, and liquid food, with a moderate allowance of meat, and without either wine or malt liquor" (Combe 84). Bull observed that "It is erroneous to suppose that women, when nursing, require to be much more highly fed than at other times ..." (289). His advice about the diet includes "the avoidance of salads, pickles, sour fruit, cucumbers, melons, acids, and the like" (274), which supports the abstinence indicated by Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox.

Another luxurious thing mentioned by Mrs. Chick is ladylike clothes:

“‘You have been already measured for your mourning, haven’t you, Richards?’ ... ‘And it’ll fit beautifully. I know,’ said Mrs Chick, ‘for the same young person has made me many dresses. The very best materials, too!’” (72; ch. 2). In the house mantua-makers are now busy on the family mourning (61; ch. 2). At those times the dresses were expensive because until the advent of the sewing-machine they were made by hand.¹² The price of the dress varies according to the materials. Mourning was usually made of wool which was more expensive than cotton which servant’s dresses were usually made of.¹³ Being given “the expensive mourning” (79; ch. 3) was indeed a good condition of employment.

Other servants in the household naturally envied the advantageous position held by the wet nurse. A wet nurse caused “the domestic discomfort and unpleasantness” (Forsyth 125). It was such a problem that even a physician gave advice about the way to keep order in the nursery (Bull 292). In *Dombey and Son* Susan Nipper, who is Florence (Floy) Dombey’s maid, is clearly hostile to Polly from the moment of their first meeting:

‘Remembering, however, if you ’ll be so good, that Miss Floy’s under my charge, and Master Paul’s under your’n.’

‘But still we needn’t quarrel,’ said Polly.

‘Oh no, Mrs Richards,’ rejoined Spitfire [Susan Nipper]. ‘Not at all, I don’t wish it, we needn’t stand upon that footing, Miss Floy being a permanency, Master Paul a temporary.’ (79; ch. 3)

Because Susan Nipper “seemed to be in the main a good-natured little body” (80; ch. 3), she soon thaws and she and Polly become friendly with each other.

Polly’s service proves satisfactory, and “Little Paul...grew stouter and

¹² Young 150. As to the sewing machine, “the chain-stitch sewing machine began to be used early in the decade [1850s] and the lock-stitch just before its close; ...” (Cunnington 170).

¹³ As for the material and the style of mourning, see Cunnington 149. Because the clothes worn by one’s servants showed one’s social status, ladies tried to dress their servants as well as possible (Hill 9). Not only Polly but also the Dombey’s were honored by Polly’s expensive mourning.

stronger every day" (100; ch. 5). At last Paul is christened at six-months, much later than the usual christening at one week. Polly is rewarded for her good service on this occasion: her eldest son is enrolled in the Charitable Grinders' School and Polly's station as a wet nurse is consolidated.

According to doctors, weaning should take place gradually between nine and twelve months. For example, Bull suggested that "as a general rule, both child and parent being in good health, weaning ought never to take place earlier than the ninth (the most usual date), and never be delayed beyond the twelfth month" (280). Combe also wrote: "When the health of the mother continues perfect, and the supply of milk abundant, weaning ought, as a rule, to take place about the ninth or tenth month, when the development of the teeth usually shows that a change of food is proper" (88). Moreover doctors recommended delayed weaning for delicate children. Bull advised that "if the child is feeble in constitution... it will be far better to prolong the nursing for a few months" (280). Polly was going to stay for at least 3 months, and maybe more, because Paul was "[n]aturally delicate" (149; ch. 8). Because of her maternal affection for the boy, however, she loses her job abruptly. She was anxious to see her son in school dress, and secretly went back to her house, taking Paul, Florence and Susan. An accident on the way causes Florence to go missing temporarily. This is enough for Mr. Dombey. Polly is sacked instantly and Paul is weaned suddenly. Mrs. Chick deplores the fact that Paul is "prematurely deprived of its natural nourishment" (141; ch. 6). Bull's observation that, "The mother's health may, in one case oblige her to resort to weaning before the sixth month ..." (279) suggests that Paul's weaning cannot be said to have been fatally premature, but its suddenness might have had a serious effect on his feeble constitution.

After Polly Mrs. Wickam is employed as a dry nurse. There are no descriptions of Paul's dry-nursing, but it seemed to have been in the nature of checking Paul's growth: "in spite of his early promise...he pined and wasted after the dismissal of his nurse" (149; ch. 8). At the age of five Paul's health proved to be declining, and "[their] darling is *not* altogether

as stout as [they] could wish" (155; ch. 8; Dickens's italics). It is not clear if his weakness is the effect of "sharp weaning" (155; ch. 8) or not, but considering the poor state of artificial feeding it may have had something to do with his weakness and his eventual early death.

The detailed descriptions of wet-nursing in *Dombey and Son* correspond to and support some of the discussions about wet-nursing of the time. Characters' responses to the wet nurse reveal common attitudes of the time unstated in medical journals. *Dombey and Son*, as a document of social history, helps to build up a picture of the wet-nursing custom in mid-nineteenth century England.

But strangely enough, the critical attitude toward the wet-nursing custom, which was prevalent among the moralistic middle class, the attitude which Dickens could easily have taken, is entirely missing in the novel. Dickens seems deliberately to evade the on-going discussion about the wet-nursing practice. He not only ignores the debate, but also is cautious to avoid criticism by depriving the baby of its mother, making his wet nurse a respectable married woman and ensuring that the baby of the wet nurse be duly hand-fed by a reliable and maybe affectionate relative. In other words, the situation in which his wet nurse is hired is one free from blame. His ignoring contemporary debate in his depiction of the wet nurse deserves further discussion.

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