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book review of

Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art by Gal Ventura

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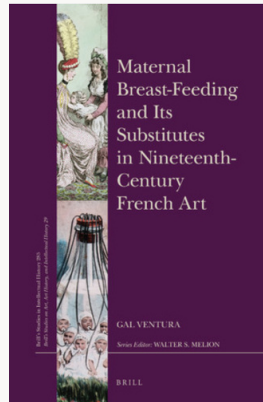
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Gal Ventura,
Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art.
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Gal Ventura's book *Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art* is a well-researched and well-illustrated study of the representation of breastfeeding women in nineteenth-century French art. Ventura traces the artists' shifting emphasis on the depiction of bourgeois mothers, dead mothers, working-class mothers, peasant mothers, wet-nurses, and *Charity* figures—all in the act of infant breastfeeding—and investigates the political circumstances in which these shifts occurred. Ventura proposes a new methodological model of analysis that combines Aby Warburg's and Erwin Panofsky's iconographic and iconological approach based on the reconstruction of "the intrinsic meaning of . . . documents . . . historically related to . . . [those] [art-]works" and Umberto Eco's "reader-oriented theories of interpretation" (XXI). Ventura calls her method one of "gathering" and "hovering," in which "gathering" consists of the formal and iconographic analysis of artworks while "hovering" refers to the investigation of shifting discursive placements, artists' intentions, and spectators' horizons of expectation. Ventura also aims to grant "agency" to the images themselves (XXII). The author thus walks an admirably fine line between the recognition of each artwork's uniqueness and the observation of its formal properties, on the one hand, and the analysis of the artworks' ideological environments that prescribed or delineated their significance, on the other.

In part I of her book, Ventura traces the history of breastfeeding in France from Rousseau's publication of his epoch-making *Émile: or on Education* (1762), in which maternal nursing is attributed prime importance for the renewal of society, to the establishment of the Goutte de Lait (Drop of Milk) foundation in Paris in 1892, which distributed pasteurized bottled milk to thousands of people (but mostly working-class mothers) at no or low cost (73). Throughout the nineteenth century, medical discourse and government biopolitics continued to discourage the use of wet-nurses and encourage maternal breastfeeding, until the invention of safe bottle-feeding provided an alternative to breastmilk. In *Émile*, Rousseau argues that only mothers' return to their "natural" duties would foster intimacy

and strong emotional bonds not only within the nuclear family, but society at large, thus counteracting civilization's alienating effects. Rousseau's discourse on exclusive maternal nursing was largely allegorical at a time when the "real" problems, others would argue, consisted of the sky-rocketing infant mortality rates associated with wet-nursing and child abandonment. Nonetheless, his authority on the subject matter grew enormously during the Revolution, when even upper-class mothers such as Madame Roland breastfed their babies in fulfillment of their duties as republican mothers. The belief in the power of maternal breastmilk gained such political urgency that during the Revolution, the rate of maternal breastfeeding increased by 40%. After the Revolution, the overall rate would hover steadily around 50% until 1860, when it climbed to 60% among Parisian mothers, but dropped dramatically to 25% after 1880 due to the emergence of bottle-feeding (45). (Even today, Ventura points out, French mothers exhibit the lowest rates of breastfeeding in the Western world at 50%.) Over the course of the nineteenth century, the medical literature continued to privilege maternal nursing, but acknowledged the ubiquity of wet-nursing and aimed to curb the high infant mortality rates associated with it. In 1874, the so-called Roussel Law demanded that every child sent out to wet-nurse be registered for the purpose of supervision by public authorities (61). Initially, the invention of bottle-feeding and rubber nipples continued to drive up mortality rates among infants due to infections, until, in the early twentieth century, the sterilization of bottles and the pasteurization of milk became more common.

The historically low rate of maternal breastfeeding among French women stands in interesting contrast to the wealth of artworks depicting mothers who nurse their own, and/or, at times, other mothers' children. In part II her book, Ventura analyzes depictions of the dead nursing mother, *Charity* figures, and wet-nurses, while part III is devoted to the investigation of representations of what appears to be exclusive maternal nursing. Some of these various iconographies proliferated during certain political periods, while others maintained their popularity throughout the nineteenth century. In Chapter 2, Ventura explores the topic of the dead or dying mother with a child attempting to suckle at her bared breast. It sets the scene for all following chapters, as Ventura maps the chronological development of breastfeeding imagery onto psychological theories of trauma and stages of grieving as defined by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Tamir Gilam, and others. According to these theories, the initial reaction to trauma and loss is characterized by "shock, repression and denial" followed by the "idealization of the deceased." Next come feelings of "protest and anger, despair and guilt," and then, finally, "acceptance and reorganization" (131). Ventura argues that Jean-Baptiste Regnault's painting *The Flood* (1789) depicts denial in the face of massive political upheavals, while Henri-Pierre Danloux's *Scene from the Flood* (1800) idealizes the death of the beautiful, half-naked mother, arranged in the pose of the dead Christ resting on the Virgin's lap (133). Orientalizing depictions of the *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* by Eugène Delacroix (1824) or historicizing depictions of saints caring for plague victims continued to repress the recognition of poverty in contemporary France and the lingering effects of Revolutionary violence, until, in the 1840s, realistic depictions of starving working-class mothers and their babies contributed to a new sense of acceptance of the violent vicissitudes of French history. Such acceptance led to an attempt at "reorganization" during the Second Empire and Third Republic, when breastfeeding peasants and bourgeois mothers conjured up a sense of plenty, peace, and abundance. Ventura also notes how the iconography of the dead nursing mother was inspired by Marcantonio Raimondo's print after Raphael's *Morbetto* (1515) and Poussin's *Plague of Ashdod* (1630) (109, 120).

Chapter 3 investigates the multiple discursive environments that assigned shifting meanings to representations of *Charity*, which remained popular all throughout the nineteenth century. *Charity*, since the Middle Ages conceived as *amor proximi* (love of one's neighbor) and *amor dei* (love of God), started to be depicted as a woman breastfeeding two infants simultaneously in early fourteenth-century Tuscany. As the most important of the three theological virtues, *Charity* rivaled the iconography of the *Madonna Lactans* that emerged at the same time. Conceived of as a mother who nurses other mothers' children, *Charity* assumed a variety of symbolic significances. Ventura shows how in 1794, a *Charity* figure breastfeeding a white and a black infant symbolized racial equality, while early socialists such as Jean-François Millet appropriated the image (1839) to depict peasant women in a favorable light, and republicans such as Honoré Daumier adopted it in order to rally support for the new revolutionary government in 1848. *Charity*'s religious significance continued to thrive independently until artists such as Édouard Cibot fused spiritual and secular meanings in *Charity Presiding over the Meeting of the State Bodies* (1853), an image that celebrates visions of "good government" during the Second Empire. Adolphe William Bouguereau's multiple depictions of *Charity* (1878–84) also supported Napoléon III's domestic policies (171), while Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's painting of *Summer* (1873) celebrates the motif's arcadian, utopian quality. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when images of maternal nursing became ubiquitous again, *Charity* gradually lost its significance.

Chapter 4 analyzes depictions of wet-nurses, which experienced a come-back during the First Empire. Ventura shows how the positive representation of wet-nurses persisted despite the medical establishment's mounting critique of non-maternal nursing. As in Étienne Aubry's painting *Brotherly Love* (1776), such positive framing of the "good" wet-nurse often includes a depiction of the caring mother. Pierre Duval le Camus's *The Wet Nurse* (1831) celebrates peasant women, while Edgar Degas's *At the Races in the Countryside* (1869), again, presents a harmonious collaboration between bourgeois birth-mother and servant milk-mother. Female Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot depicts a *Wet Nurse and her Baby* (1879) seated in a bucolic garden with beauty and dignity, while caricaturists started to eroticize the wet-nurse in her alleged encounters with soldiers and other flaneurs (e.g., Georges Bertall, *The Wet Nurse*, 1874).

In Chapter 5, Ventura shifts her analysis to representations of maternal nursing in French art. Setting the stage for the ongoing preoccupation with indigent mothers and their infants in the nineteenth century is Henri-Pierre Danloux's *Scene of Destitution* (1800). Attempting to arouse empathy with the poor through their focus on homeless but caring—and, most importantly, breastfeeding—working-class mothers, artists employed a variety of visual rhetorics and styles to achieve their end. Bouguereau's *Indigent Family* (1865), for example, shines through its classicizing, idealizing manner, which struck some critics as too beautiful, while Gustave Courbet's realistic depiction of *The Beggar's Alms at Ornans* (1868) was criticized for its "ugliness" (273). Honoré Daumier's *The Soup* (1862–65) shows, in Ventura's view, a "blend of realism with humor" (284), while Alfred Philippe Roll's *Miners' Strike* (1891) projects the hoped-for reorganization of society mentioned above (131).

Chapter 6 investigates the portrayal of breastfeeding peasant mothers, which became more prevalent during the Second Empire, in distinction to breastfeeding working-class mothers,

whose depictions were more numerous during the Second Republic. Ventura shows how a peasant woman's baring of her breast indicates that maternal nursing was considered an integral part of rural life, fitting in seamlessly into the various home and work environments, while poor, urban women's exposed breasts signaled their homelessness and poverty (301). Artists such as Jules Breton and Aimé Jules Dalou emphasize the peace and plenty symbolized by peasant mothers' milk, while Léon Lhermitte and Jean Charles Cazin depict the precariousness of day-laborers' lifestyles despite the ongoing tender care that mothers lavish on their infants. Toward the late nineteenth century, a certain nostalgia for rural life in the midst of rapid industrialization is also noticeable.

Chapter 7 analyzes the resurgence of the bourgeois nursing mother in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The reemergence of the wet-nurse and *Charity* figure after 1810 had contributed to the disappearance of the bourgeois breastfeeding mother, but during the more strident campaigns against the use of wet-nurses and the growing use of feeding bottles in the Third Republic, she reappeared with a vengeance. At that time, maternal breastfeeding rates dropped to 25%, which suggests the extent to which the practice may have differed from its representations (45). Ventura suggests it had "idealizing" and "glorifying" purposes and effects (411). Remarkably, the vast majority of such artworks were portrayals of the artists' own wives or partners: Camille Pissarro, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Édouard Debat-Ponsan, Paul César Helleu, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Maurice Denis, and Eugène Carrière participated in this trend, depicting domestic bliss and intimacy à la Rousseau through a focus on breastfeeding in their various artworks. Only Paul Gauguin's approach to the subject matter differs. In his portrayal of his Tahitian lovers breastfeeding their infants, he depicts a certain alienating lack of intimacy. Gauguin is also one of the few artists to have depicted a Breton feeding bottle (fig. 128).

This is a magisterial book that offers a comprehensive analysis of French artists' and their audiences' astounding predilection for lactation imagery. Ventura fulfills her promise of delivering a careful reading of each artwork in the context of its closely defined iconographical and iconological context, while also explaining the numerous shifts in political discourse and the increasing importance of medical interventions that accompanied the various iconographic trends. One intriguing question the book raises concerns the occasional discrepancy between shifts in the artworks' political significance and changes in social practices surrounding maternal and non-maternal breastfeeding. *Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art* is a wonderful contribution to nineteenth-century art historical—and historical—scholarship that shows how the art of breastfeeding and maternity occupied center stage at a time when Malthusian ideas and demographic policies were being intensely debated.

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