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“The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman's Nature Is Capable”: Breast-Feeding and the Sentimental Maternal Ideal in America, 1750–1860

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In 1809 the American midwife Mary Watkins published a treatise on mothering in which she admonished that any mother who neglected to breast-feed was being “deprived of a very high source of pleasure, of the most tender and endearing kind.”¹ Watkins was joining a dialogue about breast-feeding that had been taking place among medical professionals and moralists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean since the mid-eighteenth century. Worried about high rates of infant mortality and the use of wet nurses, proponents of maternal nursing initially stressed nature, health, and divine ordination to highlight the importance of the duty. By the time Watkins issued her appeal to maternal pleasure, however, an important shift in their arguments in favor of maternal breast-feeding had occurred. Beginning...

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