

The Shadow of the **Second Mother**

Nurses and nannies in theories of infant development



Prophecy Coles



A fascinating illustration of traumatogenic processes including the protective defences of encapsulation and social-psychic retreat, this subtle, intelligent and highly accessible study of the wet nurse, the nanny and the maid helps us understand the hidden foundling within each of us, especially mental health professionals in general and perhaps old-fashioned psychoanalysts in particular. Through tracing the emergence of the relational perspective from the fecund field of attachment which was originally a matter of dissident and dissonant voices within psychoanalysis, group analysis and sociology, the social unconscious is shown to be entirely relevant to our understanding of loss and melancholia in the deepest layers and kernels of our unconscious life.

Earl Hopper, PhD, psychoanalyst, group analyst and editor of the New International Library of Group Analysis

Prophecy Coles brings ‘delegated’ or substitute parents out from obscurity into the limelight. She explores the many contradictions of this role, asking questions such as: Can love really be bought? What is the impact on children of losing an early attachment figure? What does it mean for a child to love someone in a socially devalued position? What is the cost for the substitute parent herself? I found this a fascinating and subtly argued book; it deserves to be widely discussed.

Sue Gerhardt, psychotherapist and bestselling author of *Why Love Matters*

The Shadow of the Nurse explores a topic strangely neglected in psychoanalytical writing. Why have wet nurses and nannies been largely removed from history, Prophecy Coles asks, even though it is clear from the autobiographical and fictional writing that their role has been of immense emotional importance to the infants they have cared for? In her original and wide-ranging study, the author explores the reasons for this neglect, and on the significance in both past and present of surrogate forms of maternal care.

Michael Rustin, Professor of Sociology at the University of East London

It has been a great pleasure to read this important contribution to the psychoanalytic literature on an unfairly neglected theme: the significance and importance of the nurse and the nanny in infantile early development as well as in childhood in general. Written with remarkable clarity and concision, the author draws upon a lifetime of clinical and personal experience and interest in the subject, and in a series of most elegant chapters that combine literary, social and psychoanalytic insights, she shares with us her thoughts on the subject. Many are the ideas and questions this fascinating book presents us with, readily taken by the author with care, understanding, great intelligence and sensitivity. The book effortlessly succeeds in transforming ‘the shadow of the nurse’ in a touching and impressive presence. This is a most welcome addition to the libraries of everyone with an interest in children and, as the great Paula Heimann would have said, in ‘children-no-longer’.

Luis Rodríguez de la Sierra, PhD, training and supervising adult and child and adolescent psychoanalyst of the British Psychoanalytical Society

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The Shadow of the Second Mother

The Shadow of the Second Mother explores why there has been such little interest, in psychology, social history and biography, in the important contribution that 'second mothers', such as wet nurses and nannies, have had upon the emotional life of the children they have nursed. For the last 3000 years and throughout most civilisations they have nurtured the children of the privileged, and kept alive the abandoned and unwanted child, and yet there has been a profound silence surrounding the influence they may have had.

The author explores the lives of several well-known people who have been wet nursed, such as Michelangelo, Rousseau, Jack London, Nabokov and Klein. She speculates that they were all affected emotionally by their 'second mother', and concludes that a universal feature of such delegated mothering seems to be that the bond between mother and child is broken, and the child may be left with a lifelong distrust of close relationships. In *The Shadow of the Second Mother*, Coles combines an exploration of attachment theory with neurology, making it possible to give an explanation as to why these important figures have lain unnamed and ignored in our social and psychological consciousness.

This intriguing new approach to an ancient practice will be fascinating reading for psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, sociologists and students of social history.

Prophecy Coles trained at the Lincoln Centre for Psychotherapy, UK, and has had a long association with the London Centre for Psychotherapy. She has worked as a psychotherapist for 30 years and has published widely on the sibling relationship, femininity and transgenerational conflict.

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For Michael and Betty

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Reference

Coles, P. (2011) *The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past*. London: Karnac.

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Introduction

When Odysseus returned home from his 20-year voyage, he was immediately recognised by his wet nurse, Eurycleia, as she bathed his wounded leg. His wife, Penelope, took longer to recognise him (Homer, 1946). Two thousand years later, Freud, writing to his friend Fliess, was trying to recall his nurse. 'I said to myself that if the old woman disappeared from my life so suddenly, it must be possible to demonstrate the impression she made upon me. Where is it then?' (Masson, 1985: p. 271). These two contrasting images of the nurse resonate throughout this book as I explore what I have called 'delegated mothering'. She can be a remembered figure bound up in earliest memories, but, in many cases, she can be no more than a vague 'impression' who lingers tantalisingly out of conscious recall. One result of this vague 'impression' is that she often fails to appear in autobiography, social history, biography and psychological theory, as though her presence has had no meaning.

I have taken the idea that the nurse has lain behind a shadow from Freud's (1917e) paper on *Mourning and Melancholia* in which he contrasts normal mourning with pathological melancholia. Freud states that when some much loved person dies the normal reaction to their loss is to mourn, with all the attendant emotions of 'painful dejection' (p. 244). However there are other cases, when people fall into a state of melancholia, that have many of the same features as mourning, but what is significant is that the person who is mourned is not necessarily dead. The person, as it were, has gone missing, with the result that 'he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost' (p. 245). This then leads to the mourner identifying with 'the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego' (p. 248). When Freud laments the difficulty he has in finding 'the impression' of his nurse, he is also intimating that the difficulty may stem from not knowing '*what* he has lost'. This is a situation that can face any child when it loses its nurse and it furthermore suggests that the child may be left with a long lasting melancholia. However what has happened, historically, is that the nurse has been seen as no more than a pale shadow of the mother in the lives of the children she has looked after and any melancholic traces that may have been left when she leaves have been ignored.

In order to try to bring the nurse out of the shadow I have suggested that we should conceptualise her role as one of 'delegated mothering', whether she was a wet nurse or 'dry' nurse or nanny. 'To delegate' is 'to send or commission someone as a deputy or representative, with power to act for another' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1973). This definition covers the point that the wet nurse or nanny has often been 'a deputy' or 'a representative' for the mother and been in sole charge of the care and discipline of the child. In such cases she will have had an important place in the structure of the inner emotional world of the child, and, as the work of Hardin (1985) has shown, she will often be experienced as 'the second mother'.

My interest in the topic of delegated mothering has its foundations in my early life.¹ I had five nannies during the first five years of my life, at the time of the Second World War, yet I could find no 'impression' of them. One result of my failure to find their 'impression' was that it had not occurred to me to be interested in the significance of a nurse or nanny in my clinical work. I worked for 30 years as a psychotherapist but I had no clinical material about nurses. Hanna Segal, who had had a string of nannies during the first six years of her life, commented that she may have suffered 'a depressing streak, not anything damaging' (Hunter, 1993: p. 3). I had also failed to imagine that a nanny or even several nannies may have left a damaging trace, either within myself or in the psychic life of others. My lack of awareness and interest about the possible effect that early relationships with caretakers, other than the mother, might have upon the emotional life of the child, was compounded by the fact that there has been little interest in the nurse or nanny in the psychoanalytic literature, even to this day.² This may seem surprising, for, over the last 40 years, there has been an extensive development of interest in the infant mind and this has shifted the emphasis of therapy towards the impact of early relationships.³ However it seems that the absence of thought about the nurse or nanny in psychoanalytic thinking can in part be attributed to the fact that the earliest relationship is predicated upon the model of the mother and baby, even if in fact she has not looked after the child, and as a result any other caretaker becomes subsumed under the gestalt of the mother (Mahler, 1961).

It was in large part thanks to Valerie Fildes' two books, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies* (1986) and *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (1988) that I awoke to the possibility that nurses have played a larger part in the emotional history of child-care than I had imagined. I discovered that behind the child-rearing practices of employing a nanny there lay another world of wet nursing that I knew nothing about. The nanny is little more than an incarnation of the wet nurse, though now she is in a starched apron and a bottle in her hand. In other words, the idealised picture about mothers and mothering, from the early Renaissance, scarcely matches the historical truth about infant care. This earliest nurse, the wet nurse, has for the last 3000 years kept alive other people's babies by selling 'mother's milk' (Sussman, 1982). Why, Fildes challengingly asked, have 'historians, particularly those in the burgeoning field of women's lives and work, neglected to