MAKING MILK
The Past, Present and Future of Our Primary Food
Edited by Mathilde Cohen and Yoriko Otomo

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MAKING MILK

THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF OUR PRIMARY FOOD

Edited by
Mathilde Cohen and Yoriko Otomo

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
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This book is for Oscar and Rose, who love milk and who have waited patiently while we work.
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Peter Atkins is a Professor of Geography at Durham University. His main research interests are the geographies of food and drink. The main approach throughout his career has been historical, and he has recently been developing interdisciplinary and international perspectives with colleagues in the International Commission for Research on European Food History, of which he is the Senior Vice-President. In addition to his historical work, Peter has maintained strong links with South Asia, especially Bangladesh. Research here has recently included work on problems of drinking water quality. Atkins’ most recent book is *Liquid Materialities: A History of Milk, Science and the Law* (2010), which offers a new type of food history that takes seriously the stuff in foodstuffs.

Mathilde Cohen is a Professor of Law at the University of Connecticut and a research fellow at the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. She works in the fields of comparative law, constitutional law, food law, and race, gender and the law. In the past few years, she has been researching the way in which the United States and France regulate milk, be it animal, human, or plant milk. She is conducting fieldwork in both countries to uncover popular, scientific, commercial, and legal discourses on these fluids, which raise a host of economic, political, and social questions.

Yair Eldan is a member the Ono Academic College law faculty and a writer. He studied at the Hebrew University School of Law (1996–2000) and wrote his doctoral thesis at Bar Ilan University’s conflict resolution, management, and negotiations program. Eldan was a parliamentary assistant to MK Ophir Pines-Paz from the Labor party while Pines-Paz served as the Chairman of the Constitution, Law and Judiciary committee of the Knesset. Eldan teaches Jurisprudence and Jewish law, with a special interest in the intersections between law and society, law and literature, and law and psychology. Eldan is the author of *Excommunication, Death and Mourning* (a study in rabbinic shunning and excommunication) and of *Messianism? Idolatry! The Internal Logic of the Tractate in the Mishnah*, where he proposes a new literary approach to the Mishnah, a canonical Jewish legal text. He also published two novels, *The Body Map*, and *The Letter* (with Orna Reuven).

Greta Gaard is Professor of English and Coordinator of the Sustainability Faculty Fellows at University of Wisconsin-River Falls. Her work emerges from the intersections of feminism, environmental justice, queer studies, and critical animal studies, exploring a wide range of issues, from interspecies justice, material perspectives on fireworks and space exploration, postcolonial ecofeminism, and the eco-politics of climate change. Her invited essay, “Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Milk Studies,” appeared in a special issue of *American Quarterly* on Race, Gender, Species (2013). Author or editor of six books and over seventy refereed articles, Gaard’s most recent work includes her monograph, *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017) and her co-edited volume, *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (2013), with Simon Estok and Serpil Oppermann. Her creative nonfiction eco-memoir, *The Nature of Home* (Arizona UP, 2007), is being translated into Chinese and Portuguese.

Melanie Jackson is an artist and writer working in moving image, sculpture, and printed matter. She exhibited work internationally including the Dojima River Biennale, Osaka, ZKM Karlsruhe, Art Gallery New South Wales, Sydney, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago. Solo UK exhibitions include Flat Time House, John Hansard Gallery, The Drawing Room, Arnolfini and Matt’s Gallery, London where she is also represented. She was shortlisted for the Whitechapel Maxmara Award in 2010 and winner of the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2007. She is also a Senior Lecturer at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL.


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Chloé Maillet is an historian and visual artist. She is currently doing her post-doc at the Musée du quai de Branly in Paris, after receiving her PhD in Anthropological History at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. An internationally recognized visual artist, Chloé Maillet has produced genre movies, performed conferences and installations, in addition to publishing with Louise Hervé Strange Attraction, a pulp book retraçant her artwork and recent exhibitions. She has also widely published in the field of historical anthropology, in particular on gender and images as well as on animal and human milk in the Middle Ages.

Ally McCrow-Young is a PhD candidate in media studies at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. She is a co-founder of the Lund University Critical Animal Studies Network, Sweden where she graduated with a Master of Science in Media and Communication. Her recent research looks at alternative forms of political engagement, such as food activism.

Richie Nimmo is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester. His research explores the ambiguous status of nonhumans in modern knowledge-practices and the constitution of “the social” across materially heterogeneous (and multispecies) relations, systems, and flows. His PhD dissertation (2007) drew upon actor-network theory and Foucauldian genealogy to develop a socio-materiel history of dairy milk in the UK, which was also a posthumanist critique of modernity worked through an archive study of milk. This was the basis for his 2010 book, Milk, Modernity and the Making of the Human: Purifying the Social. Since then, he has extensively published in human-animal studies and actor-network theory, and has recently been working on a social analysis of the ongoing decline of honeybees associated with “colony collapse disorder.”

Yoriko Otomo is a Senior Lecturer in Law at SOAS, University of London. She was recently a Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Global History, University of Oxford and a Visiting Fellow at the University of New South Wales. Her research examines cross-cultural histories of global governance, and she has recently published Unconditional Life: The International Law Settlement (OUP, 2016). She has written and edited various articles on law and animals, and is on the board of Minding Animals International and the Australian Feminist Law Journal.

Hannah Ryan is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at Cornell. Through a decolonial and feminist approach, her dissertation research historicizes maternity in contexts of colonialism and slavery, situating breastmilk as a Transatlantic commodity in early modernity, and infant feeding as a means to access critical and neglected information about family and intimacy during colonization. Further, she seeks out the ways in which contemporary artists and writers reference these legacies by deploying maternal and breastfeeding imagery. Hannah holds a B.F.A. (magna cum laude), B.A. (magna cum laude), and M.A. from the University of Colorado, where she was awarded a research grant to write her thesis on anti-colonial murals in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and received a Best Should Teach award. She has held positions at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, the Norton Museum of Art, and the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell.
Julie Smith was formerly a senior economist in Australian and New Zealand treasuries and department of finance. She has a PhD in Economics (ANU) and, prior to joining ACERH (ANU), was at the Economics Program at the Research School of Social Sciences. She was an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health and ACERH, and was awarded an ARC Future Fellowship in 2015. She has published on public finance and health issues in journals across several disciplines, with a strong interest in public policy. She has undertaken an ARC Discovery Project on the economics of mothers’ milk and the market for infant food, and is currently researching a book on the economics of breastfeeding and regulation of markets in mothers’ milk.

Yofi Tirosh teaches at the Tel Aviv University Faculty of Law. Her research explores the interrelations between law and culture, focusing on body and gender. Employing rhetorical analysis of legal documents, she has written on the construction of gender roles in rape cases and in discourses surrounding the service of female soldiers. She has also published work on affirmative action, women and national security, and on the limits of language in judicial processes. Recently, she has been mapping socio-legal formulations of group-based exclusion, particularly in the context of the religious exclusion of women and of profiling techniques in dance clubs. Tirosh graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and wrote her doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan. She has served as a guest researcher at the New York University School of Law and at the Humboldt University in Berlin, as well as a vising professor at the Georgetown Law Center and Queen's University in Ontario, Canada.

Andrea S. Wiley is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Human Biology Program at Indiana University, Bloomington. She received her PhD in medical anthropology from University of California, Berkeley & San Francisco. She is the author of four books, including two on milk: Cultures of Milk: The Biology and Culture of Dairy Consumption in India and the United States, Harvard University Press, 2014; and Re-imagining Milk, 2nd edition, Routledge Press, 2016 (1st edition 2011). Her current research focuses on the cultural politics of milk promotion, beliefs about milk’s effects on human biology, and the relationship between milk consumption and child growth in the United States and in India.
When I began my studies of the history of milk forty-five years ago it was a lonely occupation. There were only three or four of us and the numbers stayed in single figures for a couple of decades. Since then I have spent much of my career writing about food geographies and histories, and my book *Liquid Materialities* published in 2010 presented my own personal understanding of the genealogy of milk as a commodity. My project now is to write three more volumes on milk. The first, due out shortly, is entitled *A History of Uncertainty* and looks at the historical role of milk in spreading zoonotic disease. The second will be about the rise of artificial infant feeding, especially using cow’s milk, and the implications for infant mortality at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The third will be a historical political ecology of dairying in the United Kingdom over the last three centuries. So, it seems that I have a busy retirement ahead.

The last ten to fifteen years have seen the flourishing of food history in general and I’m delighted to see that milk is at last taking its rightful place in this scholarship, as a commodity of central importance across the globe. The novelty of the recent trend is its broadening of intellectual perspectives and theoretical contexts. As the present volume confirms, milk is of interest to scholars from many different backgrounds.

But who are these people who want to discuss milk? To many it seems a trivial topic, hardly one for cutting-edge research in the social sciences or humanities. In this narrow view, milk is for dairy specialists with the technical or scientific skills of agronomists or processors. More broadly then should it be for historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists? Or in the post-disciplinary sense can we take it for granted that the crossing of disciplinary boundaries and the sharing of perspectives will create insights that are more than the sum of their constituent parts? An important lesson of the present volume is that many voices can lead to greater depths of understanding. The juxtapositions and oppositions create something fresh and new. Above all there is harmony in the ultimate message, that milk occupies a focal point in society. We all have to eat, and though we don’t have to drink milk or consume butter and cheese, their presence or absence in a diet tells us a great deal about the individual consumer and her place in society.

After reading this collection it will be impossible to approach milk in quite the same way again. It is a mother’s (human and non-human) contribution to young life that has been diverted and is therefore freighted, in the very same moment of consumption, with complex meanings of both nourishment and exploitation. While the contemplation of such complexities can be challenging, I would encourage readers to see this book as a whole. The chapters stand in their own right separately, of course, but it is the multivocal diversity that is the book’s greatest strength.

*Em. Professor Peter J. Atkins, University of Durham, UK*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Milk is a relational substance produced by a typically female mammal for consumption by another, typically infant, mammal of the same species. It is one of the few foods produced for others. Self-breastfeeding remains by and large an oddity. One does not produce milk to drink it oneself. Milk is also inherently interdependent: it is produced by as well as for others. Lactating mammals literally transform their food intake, and parts of themselves, to excrete milk. Yet, absent stimulation in the form of suckling or the stimulus of an infant, lactation will not be induced, or at least not long term. This ontology of interdependence explains milk’s peculiar compositional quality. Milk’s nutritional and immunological components change daily to match the unique developmental needs of its infant recipients. It becomes more fluid when the young need more hydration, fattier, or more protein-rich when they need more sustenance. Milk contains different hormones depending on the time of the day, some facilitating sleep, others, awakeness. It carries antibodies, which are specific to the surrounding environment, helping children ward off infections. In sum, to use Angela Garbes’ (2016) metaphor, milk may appear like “a private conversation between mother and child.”

In practice, however, many actors other than just a mother and her offspring intrude into this “private” conversation. In the human realm, those include scientific, medical, legal, and religious authorities, as well as economic agents such as farmers, food industrialists, and lobbyists. Humans are unusual among mammals in that some populations consume milk of different species well past weaning and infancy. Among these societies, milk is treated as a public good requiring state control over its production and distribution. A globally traded commodity, milk, particularly animal milk, has thus become one of the most highly regulated foods. But human interventions often result in transforming milk from a caring and relational substance into a vector of oppression. If the act of nursing conjures up images of tranquil bonding, for certain species, in particular for domesticated dairy animals as well as for certain women, lactation is bound with separation and exploitation.

Milk oppressions are multiple. Naming or conceptualizing a substance as “milk” or “milky” appears to call for its exploitation for human purposes. This is why this book deliberately adopts a non-biological definition of milk, so as to encompass the full range of milk’s material, affective, historical, semantic, symbolic, and economic relations. The milk at stake here includes not only the increasing variety of plant and synthetic milks, but also, perhaps, other substances that humans treat like milk. What are typical forms of milk injustices? Most obviously, lactating animals and human mothers are devalued and commodified while the recipients of the milk—typically human children, but also adult humans—are elevated into a framework of greater value, socially and economically. Milk is complicit in many forms of brutal farming practices (from the forcible impregnation
of cows, to their separation from their calves, to the butchering of male calves); human colonization and victimization (milk production requires vast lands and the dairy business relies on a subjugated workforce exploitable at will); and environmental destruction (the dairy industry is a key contributor to global warming); as well as the malnutrition of everybody involved (baby mammals—human and nonhuman—being too often deprived of breast milk while human adults are encouraged to drink a fluid most cannot even digest). Milk is the ultimate sign of labor: anything that produces it becomes part of an exploitative system: domesticated cows, lactating women, and dairy workers.


Our inquiry could begin with the act of breastfeeding itself, provoking questions around “how” and the “how much”: questions laid bare by Julie Smith’s work on the economics of human breastfeeding. From there, it is the separation of milk from both human and animal bodies that engenders a host of inquiries. Reading primarily images (art, advertising, and photographs) and language (of law, of advertising), the chapters in
this volume examine the relationship between milk and the Church; milk and the state; technology; capital; gender, and race. They foreground and politicize human and animal milk, appreciating that the two substances are intimately connected and articulating the ways in which they are made to be distinct from one another. They demonstrate how a holistic investigation of milk illuminates relations between humans, in particular along the axes of gender, race, and class, as well as between humans, animals, and plants. Situated in diverse geographical, cultural, and disciplinary contexts, the contributions to this volume allow us to ask what milk is, how it is made, and, moreover, what it does.

We have structured this volume into four parts, and cross-referenced discussions where possible. Part I begins with Chloé Maillet’s “More than Food: Animals, Men and Supernatural Lactation in Occidental Late Middle Ages” (Chapter 1). Maillet gives a historical and theological context to milk-feeding and milk-drinking today, examining the transformational power of milk to create kinship and to effect salvation (depending on who is doing the feeding). She argues that the ontological relations engendered by milk between humans, animals, and the divine in the late Middle Ages stand in stark contrast to those relations of the twentieth century. In Chapter 2, “Feminized Protein: Meaning, Representations, and Implications,” Carol Adams examines the gender politics of twentieth-century representations of milk feeding, arguing that modern representations of milking, both promoting dairy milk and campaigning against it, reproduce misogynist ideology. Andrea Wiley in “Growing a Nation: Milk Consumption in India since the Raj” (Chapter 3) offers us another dimension to the struggle over the symbolic meaning invested in milk, historicizing a twentieth-century milk-feeding project, “Operation Flood,” to describe the interplay between religious, economic, and nationalist ideologies at work in postcolonial India.

Part II begins with Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie’s “Unreliable Matriarchs” (Chapter 4), which asks what it means for milk to be separated from the technologized body of the cow. The authors argue that the process of separating milk from the body and representing it “purifies” that fluid and enables us to project onto it all of the fantasies that drive our modern economy. Richie Nimmo, in “The Mechanical Calf: On the Making of a Multispecies Machine” (Chapter 5), explores the creation by men of the earliest mechanical milking machines, offering a historical case study to demonstrate the corporeal and relational impact of the technification of milk extraction. Yofi Tirosh and Yair Eldan in Chapter 6, “Milk, Adulteration, Disgust: Making Legal Meaning” analyze an Israeli consumer scandal over adulterated milk, which resulted in a ruling of high damages against the milk producer, compensating consumers for the disgust they felt when learning the milk’s content (by the idea that the milk was not “pure” as some silicon had been added to it). Milk here becomes intertwined with values such as whiteness, purity, nationalism, and faithfulness, and provides courts with the opportunity to affirm these values in constructing the citizen-consumer. Julie Smith in “Markets in Mothers’ Milk: Virtue, Vice, Promise or Problem?” (Chapter 7) offers a feminist economic framework to demonstrate the macroeconomic value of women’s unpaid lactation and breastfeeding, by using contemporary market prices for selected countries in Asia, Europe, and America.
Introduction

Part III Queering Milk: Male Feeding and Plant Milk, begins with Mathilde Cohen’s “The Lactating Man” (Chapter 8). Cohen examines the biological, social, and cultural phenomena of male lactation, arguing that it should be understood as a continuum of milk-feeding practices. She uses animal-human comparisons to illustrate how (human) sex and gender-based assumptions surrounding lactation and breastfeeding are culturally constructed. Hannah Ryan further explores the relation of men to milk feeding in her historical study, “‘Milk is for Calves, Breastmilk for Babies.’ Alfred Bosworth’s Reconstituted Milk and the Women Who Innovated Infant Feeding Amid an American Health Crisis” (Chapter 9). By tracing the histories of women who sold or donated their breast milk, nurses who collected and administered it, and wet nurses who worked through a health crisis of infant mortality in early twentieth-century Boston, Ryan uncovers the material and affective labor that is obscured in the corporatization of milk. In Chapter 10, “Plant Milk: From Obscurity to Visions of a Post-dairy Society,” Tobias Linné and Ally McCrow-Young go on to look at the Swedish oat milk company Oatly. By showing how notions of plant milk are “permeated by the complex dynamics of race, gender, class, and species,” the chapter maintains a critical sensibility towards our consumption of milk in general, even if it does not involve the direct exploitation of animals. This part ends with Greta Gaard’s “Critical Ecofeminism: Milk Fauna and Flora” (Chapter 11), with her examination of how the presence of milk has signified a paradise or promised land. Gaard proposes a trans*ecofeminist critical methodology to pursue a relational politics to food—and in particular milk—production.

Part IV, Thinking about Plant Milk, ends this volume with a reflection on the necessity and difficulties of resisting our current milk economy. Jessica Eisen responds to Gaard’s questions of method in “Milk and Meaning: Puzzles in Posthumanist Method” (Chapter 12). Eisen exposes the methodological challenges posed by posthumanist or interspecies accounts of milk and justice, and calls for greater “listening” to the clear nonhuman suffering communicated by animals, if not plants. Matilda Arvidsson’s “DIY Plant Milk: A Recipe-Manifesto and Method of Ethical Relations, Care, and Resistance” “considers the political theology of milk as perfecting a relation: between mother and child, between sovereign state and lawful citizen, and between corporation and consumer,” and includes directions on how to make plant-based milk at home.

Thinking about milk is important. And in light of our modern global crises of masculinity, of food sovereignty, and of climate change, it is urgent. We hope that this volume will convey some of the richness of collaborative and interdisciplinary analysis, and that it will inspire you to look differently at the making of milk and other forms of sustenance.

Mathilde Cohen and Yoriko Otomo
PART I
DRINKING MILK: HISTORIES
AND REPRESENTATIONS
Introduction

The French nineteenth-century writer Victor Hugo and his wife were disappointed by the wet nurses they had hired for their son, and decided to replace them with a goat. “Here is Leopold fed by a goat! It’s his fifth wet nurse and I hope this last one will give us satisfaction.” (Hugo et al. 1988: 552).¹ Hugo’s description of the poor socio-economic situation of wet nurses at that time, according to Hugo’s correspondence, stresses that they were obliged to give up any relationship with their own partner and children. Leopold Hugo’s former wet nurse was suspected of being pregnant (a test proved her milk to curdle when heated) (Hugo et al. 1988: 549). This led Hugo to imagine that a goat would be a much more trustworthy wet nurse. Victor and Adèle Hugo described the boy as their little “kid” (chevreau), the French word not having the same equivocal significance; it really meant he had become the goat’s offspring. Unfortunately the “kid” died shortly thereafter.

* I thank Pierre-Olivier-Dittmar and Astrée Questiaux without whom I would not have been able to write these lines. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Marie-France Morel, Didier Lett, and Salvatore d’Onofrio.
Making Milk

As a historian specializing in gender and kinship studies, I have been studying texts and images dealing with cross-species milk kinship in the Middle Ages, when wet nurses were not as organized as they were in Modern societies, and when most mothers still breastfed their own children (Morel and Lett 2006). These substitutions of women with goats struck me as I was preparing a paper with colleagues on animal breastfeeding (Dittmar, Maillet, and Questiaux 2011). Soon thereafter, the closest I experienced to being a goat or a cow was when I was expressing my own milk in order to give it to a milk bank, hoping it would help with feeding premature infants. Disappointed by the small quantity of milk expressed, I observed with concern the peculiar machine that was pumping in front of me, thinking of a farmer recording the decline in production in an old cow. Then I heard the cry of my own son waking up, and was surprised to see the milk flowing in the machine and filling the bottle at an increasing speed. From that moment on, I always expressed milk with him in the same room and filled the fridge with bottles of my milk, wondering how cows managed to do it without their calves. I did this for six months, the maximum time allowed by the milk bank. I felt as though I had a little milk farm at my place. This experience led me to reflect on what milk was, how it was produced, and what it meant to give milk to other beings. It was only from that moment that I experienced milk as an actual bodily substance, realizing that it was much more than food. I had a brief glimpse of milk when it was an unstable and rare substance—a far cry from the milk we see in shops, selling for merely a few dollars per plastic gallon.

During the late Middle Ages, milk was indeed more than food. It was understood to create kinship, and as changing the very essence of the person who was drinking it. The origin of milk, the breast of a mammal, whether it be a human being or another animal, could not be as invisible as it is nowadays in bottled milk. Then, lactation and the transmission of milk signified a means of making and of understanding relational beings—humans, animals, and gods. Now it is useful as a conceptual tool to think “problems with women and problems with society” (Strathern 1988), as well of course as problems between species. More than any other food, milk had the power to transmit not only nutrition, but also filiation, character, and virtue, from the twelfth century when the Marian cult was exalted by theologians, to the beginning of the sixteenth century when naturalism became a central reference point. As Philippe Descola has shown (Descola, Llloyd, and Sahlins 2013), it is then that the ontological distinction between humans and animals gradually replaced a worldview based on analogies, particularly analogies between humans and non-humans. I argue in this chapter that what we have forgotten about the relational links between milk producers and their consumers might help us in thinking about solutions for dairy issues today.

The examples I give of milk as kinship-making are mainly taken from hagiography (accounts of the lives of saints or sainthood candidates) and predication literature (sermons and examples of virtues gathered to help predicators in the preparation of their speeches). These sources show a distorted image of society in order to create a laity suitable for governance by the dominant institution in Europe, the Christian Church. But, as many scholars have shown, these texts not only functioned as models: they are often paradoxical or subversive; they give a glimpse of deviant behavior that could only
work if embodied by marginal characters such as powerful single women, or men behaving like women (Bynum 1992; Patlagean 1976; Easton 2009; Karras 2005).

**Milk as divine product**

*Milk is blood, blood is milk (twelfth to thirteenth centuries)*

Medieval medicine conceived of lactation according to principles from the Galenic tradition, the most influential medical tradition inspired by the works of the Greek scientist Galen (129–216 AD) (Morel and Lett 2006). Breastfeeding, valued more if coming from the infant’s biological mother’s breasts, was thought to transmit a substance that was complementary to the blood that mothers gave the fetus *in utero*. Milk itself, according to Galen’s theory, is blood whitened *in utero* through the process of *dealbation* (literally: whitening of the blood) (Morel and Lett 2006; Dittmar, Maillet, and Questiaux 2011). It transmits some of the characteristics that blood transmits in the uterus, such as resemblance. The fetus continues to build itself after birth, and milk contributes to this process: “Milk is blood cooked in the uterus” (*Lac enim sanguis est in uberibus decoctus*) according to Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican from the end of the thirteenth century, author of the collection of hagiographies, *Golden Legend* (de Voragine [1260] 1760: Sermo II; Jacquart and Thomasset 1988).

The cult of the Virgin Mary, too, enhanced the spiritualization of milk. Mary was changed by her contact with her offspring as she developed compassion by breastfeeding him, just as much as the milk nurtured Jesus. Many examples of the importance of the lactating Virgin Mary (*Virgo Lactans*) can be seen on almost every wall of late medieval churches. The omnipresence of the Virgin from the thirteenth century onward led Jean Wirth to argue that an archeologist without any notion of Christianity would have thought of it as a cult of the Mother Goddess (Wirth 1989). To save souls from purgatory Mary usually shows her breasts to remind God/Christ that she has been feeding him her milk. Some miracles in the Christian tradition concern blood that turns back into milk: *lac pro sanguine* (milk for blood).

In Saint Blase’s life, for example, dating from the fourth century and publicized around Europe in de Voragine’s *Golden Legend* (1260), one can read the description of the martyrdom of one of Saint Blase’s female companions:

And one of them that had two small children ran hardily and took the smocks of linen cloth and threw them in the furnace for to go after herself if she had failed. And the children said to the mother, leave us not after thee, but right sweet mother, like as thou hast nourished us with thy milk so replenish us with the realm of heaven. Then the tyrant did do hang them, and with hooks and crochets of iron did do tear their flesh and all to rent it. Of whom the flesh was as white as snow, and for blood they gave out milk.

According to this narrative, the young martyrs were still breastfed not long before their torture, still “full” of milk. The miracle of wounds letting milk flow instead of blood was repeatedly mentioned by all the Dominican writers of Jacobus de Voragine’s time (Barry 1914). The miracle also occurred in the context of adult martyrdom. It was mentioned first in the *Acts of Paul* as reported by Jacobus de Voragine:

> And as soon as the head was from the body, it said: Jesus Christus! which had been to Jesus or Christus, or both, fifty times. From his wound sprang out milk into the clothes of the knight, and afterward flowed out blood. In the air was a great shining light, and from the body came a much sweet odour


At the end of the fifteenth century, manuscripts illuminating these scenes depicted milk flowing from every wound of the martyrs in Saint Blase’s life, whether they were adults, children, men, or women. Interestingly, a collection of *exampla*, i.e., a digest of anecdotes or stories presented as truthful and written for preaching purpose (Brémond, Le Goff, and Schmitt 1982) dating from 1320, the *Ci nous dit* (literally: “As it is said”), explains that the flowing of milk and blood from St. Paul’s wounds had different significations. Blood meant martyrdom whereas milk meant that St. Paul had remained a virgin in the face of temptation (Blangez 1979).

The reference to the Lactating Virgin was accentuated to the point where milk became associated with virginity, whereas in real life lactation is linked to maternity and therefore to sexual intercourse. This is where Jean Wirth’s idea of Christianity’s depiction as a “Mother Goddess” should be nuanced. The image of the Virgin Mary often functions not so much to signify gender relations, but to build a complex duality between human and god, men and women, blood and milk.

**Male lactation (twelfth to fourteenth centuries)**

If milk can signify virginity, it is also linked to examples of lactation not at all related to pregnancy (Walentowitz 2002). Among the examples of *lactatio agravidica* (lactation without pregnancy), the most unorthodox is certainly that of the lactating man (Cohen this volume).

From the twelfth century, the cult of the Virgin Mary influenced works of art with the apparition of the Coronation of the Virgin around 1140 (Camille 1996; Camille 1999; Wirth 2008), but also became a leading subject in preaching strategies. It led to, or was accompanied by, a great number of sermons—the most famous being the *Comments on the Song of the Song* by Bernard of Clairvaux (Clairvaux and Halflants 1971). To briefly explain, the Marian cult in Western Europe (mostly in France, the German Empire, England, and Italy) feminized Jesus Christ in order to emphasize the parallel of charity and suffering between him and his mother/wife. The Virgin Mary was identified in the Christian Church as being married to Christ (Baschet 2000: chap. 1). This identification first occurred in a series of texts rooted in Cistercian literature, in France and Italy, where
the exploitation of Mary’s images was omnipresent, as demonstrated in Caroline Walker Bynum’s (1982) classical essay. The lactating man, though not impossible in real life (as Mathilde Cohen argues in her chapter in this volume) had a different significance in medieval spiritual literature. Lactating men abound in sermons written by the Cistercian monk Guillaume de Saint Thierry (1085–1158) and his friend and spiritual brother who became later a saint, Bernard de Clairvaux (1090–1153).

The idea behind the lactating man is here again that the milk one drinks creates the person one becomes. Bernard de Clairvaux argues that bad Christians were fed bad milk, and good ones, better milk:

Let the children of Babylon seek for themselves pleasant mothers, but pitiless, who will feed them with poisoned milk, and soothe them with caresses which will make them fit for everlasting flames; but those of the Church, fed at the breasts of her wisdom, having tasted the sweetness of a better milk, already begin to grow up in it unto salvation, and being fully satiated with it they cry […].

Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter LXXVIII to Suger, Abbot of Saint Denis

When his cousin flees to Cluny, the opposing religious order, Bernard of Clairvaux claimed to have been betrayed like a betrayed breastfeeding mother: “I have fathered you in religion by my example and my words. I breastfed you” (Letter 1).5 One century later, Saint Clare of Assisi had a vision of herself suckling Saint Francis’ breast, her spiritual father, and founder of the Franciscan order: “When she arrived next to Saint Francis, he showed a breast and told her: ‘come, take and suckle.’”6

In that vision, Francis is clearly flashing his breast, whereas in visual representations, it is more likely to find the Christ, and Saint Francis who received the same wounds, showing wound on his side rather than a breast. These so-called double-intercession images that appear later in the fourteenth century show in parallel Christ making blood flowing from his wound and the Virgin making milk flow from her breast (Walker 1985; Bynum 1987: chap. 8, figure 28).

It is interesting to notice that aside from Jesus and his nutrient wounds, no images of breastfeeding men have been found in the late Middle Ages. For the front cover of his 1984 book about the folklore and hagiographical stories of lactating men, Roberto Lionetti chose a copy of Jusepe de Ribera’s 1631 Bearded Woman. The person depicted looks like a bearded man breastfeeding a chubby baby, while being in fact a celebrity—Magdalena Ventura—in seventeenth-century Italy, giving birth to three sons before her beard grew at the age of thirty-seven.7 This sole portrait of a “breastfeeding man,” therefore, is not that of a saint, but of a very unusual commoner.

Saints such as Saint Mammas (men who miraculously breastfed children to save them from starvation) do not seem to have been depicted lactating. It is as if lactation, despite its bigendered conceptualization in theology, could only be represented as the purview of women or female animals. Whereas Bernard of Clairvaux described himself many times as lactating in his written work, popular imagery represents him as being breastfed by the Virgin Mary.
Figure 1.2 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Bearded Woman (La mujer Barbuda, Magdalena Ventura con su marido)*, 1631, Hospital de Tavera, Toledo, Spain.
Cross-species and adult breastfeeding: transgressions and miracles

The morality of lactation: women and beasts (twelfth to fifteenth centuries)

While representations of spiritual breastfeeding sometimes crossed the gender line, the most common and profane representations of lactation was typically gendered and culturally determined by species (human-animal). In Romanic art (eleventh to twelfth centuries), the theme of women breastfeeding snakes is very common. It appears on some of the most beautiful column capitals in churches that are masterpieces of Romanic art such as at the Moissac and Vezelay Abbeys in France. Art historian Emile Mâle (1922) interprets this iconography as a representation of lust, but it might have meant more than that (Dittmar, Maillet, and Questiaux 2011). As Jean Wirth (2009) argues, women's breasts were not linked to sexual life before the twelfth century. At the time, eroticism seems to have focused on the lower part of the body (legs and sex). Breasts were mainly seen as lactating organs, for which there were no restrictions on representation. Later, female dresses began to exhibit low necklines, which can be interpreted as an eroticization of breasts, but this did not happen before the second half of the fourteenth century. An exemplum dating from 1320–1330 still recounts that the women in hell suckled by snakes are those who refused to breastfeed orphans (Gobi 1991: chap. 250). The nursing snakes could have been linked to the penitence of bad mothers as early as the twelfth century, but it is difficult to prove as there are no testimonies from that period.

The image of Clermont-Ferrand’s Bible is both cross-gender and cross-species. The lactating person, in a rigid position, is breastfeeding a snake as well as a naked human. The image should be understood within the context of the Gloss of the First Epistle to the

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 1.3** Saint Paul (?) breastfeeding a child and a snake, *Bible*, BM Ms. 1, f.452, twelfth century, Clermont-Ferrand, France.