

### Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America

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## Review

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**Doyle, Nora.** *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America.*  
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In *Maternal Bodies*, winner of the prestigious Allan Nevins Prize from the Society of American Historians, Nora Doyle explores the tension between women's lived experiences of motherhood, both physical and emotional, and the cultural representations of motherhood that began to emerge in the second half of the eighteenth century. In terms of women's experiences of motherhood, Doyle notes significant continuity. For example, despite the fact that the average number of children American women bore and reared did decrease during the period, "childbearing and childrearing continued to define most women's lives" (2). Another example of continuity during the era was that most women delivered their babies at home in the presence of and with the assistance of other women, though the numbers of urban-dwelling women who delivered their children under the supervision of male physicians did begin to grow. In the chapters Doyle dedicates to the examination of women's experiences and perceptions of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, very little changed. Women continued to "count" their pregnancies and births much as their mothers and grandmothers before them had. Moreover, their writings continued to reflect an understanding that their bodies were at the center of their experiences.

Despite the overall continuity in women's lived experiences of motherhood, Doyle exposes a great deal of change in terms of the cultural representations of motherhood and feminine ideology during this same period. Most notably, Doyle argues, by the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new emphasis on women as *childrearers*, as opposed to the previous era's focus on their role as *childbearers*, had begun to emerge from Enlightenment thought and Protestant evangelicalism. Drawing on the work of previous historians including Ruth Bloch, Linda Kerber, and Nancy Theriot, Doyle identifies this new societal gender ideal as "sentimental motherhood."

Central to her examination of "sentimental motherhood" is the cultural construction of the female body. Prior to this era, the valuing of women's bodies for their reproductive capacity

resulted in the imagining of women's bodies as debased and disorderly. By contrast, the sentimental maternal ideal began to emphasize "women's emotional and moral qualities," not their bodies. Doyle writes, "at the heart of this study is an examination of the role the body played in defining motherhood. Putting the body at the center of the history of motherhood reveals that perceptions and representations of corporeality were crucial to defining motherhood, both as it was lived by childbearing women and as it was configured into a potent cultural symbol" (5). Although focusing on the maternal body might seem to suggest a degree of biological determinism, Doyle expertly situates the maternal body she studies within a social and cultural context. On the one hand, there were cultural representations of motherhood that increasingly tried to divorce women's reproduction and childrearing from their physical bodies by emphasizing the emotional satisfaction of becoming a mother. On the other hand, there were women's physical experiences which often resulted not in the sentimentalization of motherhood but often in fear combined with physical exhaustion and discomfort.

Studying the tension between women's realities and societal prescriptions in many avenues of women's lives is nothing new. Historians of women have long emphasized the differences between the two and continue to do so, taking into special consideration the disparity between social ideals and the realities of life for women of color and women from the lower classes. Doyle is no exception in that regard, finding that central to the unbodying of motherhood in culture was the definition of sentimental motherhood as a white, middle-class identity. Doyle asserts, "the disembodied sentimental mother of print culture became clearly defined as white and socioeconomically privileged, precluding many women from claiming the moral and emotional authority and privilege of the good mother" (7).

Also of importance is Doyle's effective placement of her analysis in the greater context of changes in how American culture during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had begun to disassociate women's productive labor from the definition of work and how by extension women who had to work both within and outside of the home were excluded from the ideal of the sentimentalized mother. While men's labors were defined as work and were paid accordingly, women's labors within the home were sentimentalized as activities they did out of maternal love which, therefore, had no monetary value.

Doyle organizes her chapters into pairs. Chapter 1 explores the shift in medical texts away from a focus on women and their bodies during childbirth to an emphasis on the

disembodied uterus and the work of male physicians in delivering children from it. Chapter 2, its accompanying chapter, by contrast explores women's narratives of childbearing and the pain and physical toll it took on their bodies. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on breastfeeding. In Chapter 3, Doyle examines how breastfeeding was romanticized in prescriptive literature as satisfying and even pleasurable while Chapter 4 assesses women's often difficult and unpleasant experiences with breastfeeding and with the contradictions inherent in women from the upper classes using wet nurses from the lower classes who as "professional breastfeeders" were necessarily excluded from the sentimentalization of breastfeeding because they nursed someone else's child rather than their own. Chapters 5 and 6 move the comparison away from ideal versus reality to explore the implications of the sentimentalization of motherhood in print and visual culture. In Chapter 6 Doyle continues that focus but shifts it to the role of motherhood within the print and visual culture of the anti-slavery movement. While abolitionists tried to use the common bonds of motherhood as a means to gain adherents to the anti-slavery cause, authors and artists did not disembody the enslaved mother's motherhood. Instead, their focus was on how slavery detrimentally impacted the enslaved mother's experience of motherhood. While effective in this regard, Doyle argues that such representations also perpetuated a race-based division of motherhood into white, middle class transcendent mothers (the sentimentalized ideal) and embodied black mothers who could not, by definition, achieve that ideal.

Using a wide array of primary sources including letters and diaries written by mothers and print culture including medical texts, prescriptive literature, visual culture, and popular literature, Doyle explores the history of the maternal body, not to "essentialize women as mothers, but to historicize childbearing and motherhood" (12). Despite the wealth of sources, she consults, Doyle is quick to acknowledge the limitations of them, especially in terms of race and class. *Maternal Bodies* both continues an ongoing historical dialogue about the differences between socially-constructed gender ideals and the realities of women's lives, but also begins a new chapter in that dialogue by using the body as a central category of analysis.

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