IT WERE BEST', wrote Edinburgh physician James McMath in 1694, 'that all Mothers might nurse their own Children', but he went on to lament that few 'now a days do it, save the poorer'. Most well-to-do women in Scotland and elsewhere in early modern Europe turned their newborns over to wet nurses, despite all medical advice to the contrary. Because lactation impedes conception, and perhaps too because of taboos against having sex during the nursing period, widespread wet-nursing shows up in the demographic record: in Aberdeen, women in the upper third of society bore significantly more children at shorter intervals than their poorer, breastfeeding (and possibly abstaining) neighbours. But if rich women would not breastfeed for themselves, they could at least be urged to be careful as to whom they chose in their stead. The old adage 'as the nurse is, so the child will be', was taken literally, because everyone knew that a woman's milk conveyed character and temperament along with nutrients and contagions: 'in sucking her [the child] will draw in both the vices of her body and mind'. These words echoed centuries of medical opinion in Europe, but Scottish readers could have been forgiven for thinking they were written especially for them, because the sucking in of vice was a matter of particular relevance in a country where respectable parents appear to have been much more likely than their English or western European counterparts to hire unwed mothers as wet nurses. Just as French and English parents were reporting difficulty finding suitable wet nurses, McMath blithely declared 'Nor are good Nurses hard to be got'. He did not elaborate, but his Scottish readers all knew that prospective wet nurses were as close as the nearest church, where they could be found any Sunday, seated facing the congregation on stools of repentance. There is no reason to suspect that parents in Scotland cared any less for the moral and physical welfare of their newborns; nor were respectable Scots notably tolerant of sex outside of marriage, especially among the servants. Yet numbers of seemingly caring Scottish parents appear to have considered bastard-bearing, the literal embodiment of vice, no barrier to employment as a wet nurse to their child. Why was that?

In the providentialist universe of the seventeenth century, immorality of all sorts was thought to put entire communities in the way of God’s
wrath, but in Scotland as elsewhere the struggle to impose ‘godly
discipline’ on unruly bodies and wayward souls tended to concentrate,
even fixate, on sins of the flesh.⁶ The country bristled with kirk sessions,
one in every parish, each of them busy with many things but dedicated
first and foremost to the detection, pursuit, and punishment of unwed
mothers (and, slightly less often, fathers).⁷ The chances that an unmarried
pregnant woman would escape the attentions of the kirk were slim to nil
in most parts of the lowlands.⁸ Once caught, public shaming was assured
and there was a heavy fine to pay.⁹ Yet even so, comparatively high levels
of illegitimacy persisted throughout the era of godly discipline (roughly
1560—1760) and beyond.¹⁰

Much has been written on Scottish illegitimacy, but that persistence
remains to be fully explained. Of course, Scotland was a poor country
and many young people could not afford to establish the separate
household that marriage entailed, but we should not presume that every
single woman entering into a sexual relationship, or even those who
became pregnant, had marriage in mind. When hauled into court for
bastardy, Scottish women, unlike their sisters in other countries, almost
never claimed that the men had promised to marry them.¹¹ Church
authorities did not push offending couples to marry, nor was irregular
‘common law’ marriage common in the seventeenth century, as suggested
by the fact that nearly all the women who bore multiple illegitimate
children did so by multiple men.¹²

If shotgun weddings and cohabitation were uncommon, there must
have been other mechanisms in place to enable women to cope with
unwed motherhood. Poor relief was seldom an option, because church
and secular authorities rarely granted charity to young unwed mothers
and their children. Women recently convicted of fornication almost never
appeared on Aberdeen’s poor relief rolls.¹³ Some fathers promised to
provide for their bastard children, and the kirk helped broker child
support where private arrangements broke down, but given the low
status of most fathers such payments were likely as meagre as they were
unreliable.¹⁴ In the nineteenth century, most unmarried mothers-to-be in
the rural north-east moved back in with their parents until the child was
weaned, leaving it with them when they returned to full-time employment
as farm or domestic servants.¹⁵ No doubt such arrangements were made
in earlier centuries as well, though higher rates of mortality will have
made grand-parents scarcer.¹⁶

The coping mechanism that concerns us here, wet-nursing, was more
peculiar to the early modern period, since from the mid-eighteenth
century rich women increasingly took to breastfeeding for themselves.¹⁷
Historians have failed to note the earlier link between illegitimacy and
wet-nursing, partly because it merited only occasional and generally
oblique references in the kirk session records on which most studies of illegitimacy rest, and partly because it had not occurred to us that Scotland might diverge in this particular from English and European models, whereby (outside aristocratic circles) nearly all wet nurses are said to have been married women in villages taking in children from the nearby town. Aberdeens kirk session records, however, make the connection between unwed mothers and wet nurses explicit, and they show just how common live-in nurses were in the royal burgh.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, Aberdeen was a compact, moderately prosperous place of about 7,500 people, with perhaps 2,000 more living in the immediate vicinity; a good-sized city by British standards. A busy North Sea port and a university town, it was the market and service centre for a mainly lowland hinterland of some 100,000 people. The north-east was a poor region in a poor country, where the majority of the rural population were landless sub-tenants working the land and whatever else was going, being paid sometimes in cash, sometimes in kind. Rural poverty was Aberdeen's competitive advantage in the international woollens trade: urban merchants made fortunes by paying sub-subsistence wages to thousands of part-time, mainly rural, mainly female outworkers.

`It is this' noted one north-east commentator, 'which bringeth money to the Commons, other ways of getting it, they have not'.

There was another way of getting money, and that was to move to town. Like any city, Aberdeen attracted large numbers of migrants seeking work, most of them young single people from within a radius of about forty kilometres. Because women's wages were so low, a majority of Aberdeen households, many of them modest indeed, employed one or more female domestics — about half of whom had moved into town from elsewhere. Women aged fifteen to twenty-four arriving in Aberdeen to work as domestic servants outnumbered all male immigrants combined, contributing to a lop-sided sex ratio (seventy-one men to every 100 women in the 1690s) typical of early modern towns. Many of these women likely intended only a short stay, perhaps a single six-month contract. Others were in it for the medium haul, trying to save money for a dowry or to support family back home. Their position was always tenuous, because, after gender, the most fundamental distinction in urban society was between native-born and established residents, who were deemed of the town, and the mainly transient newcomers, who were merely in it.

This distinction was especially critical for migrant women, who might be dismissed by employers at any time but could make no claim on the city's poor relief rolls, reserved as they were for native and established residents of seven years or more.

Living away from parental supervision in crowded quarters amongst
mixed company, female domestics were at considerable risk of becoming pregnant: in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, this was the fate of just over twenty servants a year in Aberdeen. The constant flow of people in and out of towns makes estimates of urban illegitimacy very difficult; contemporaries, alas, were not inclined to calculate illegitimacy ratios for us, but they knew a lot of sin when they saw it, and Aberdeen’s city fathers responded with a particularly strenuous campaign for godly discipline. For much of the seventeenth century, the Aberdeen kirk session drew yearly on the services of three ministers, five magistrates, and thirty-six elders and deacons, and after 1657 its efforts were reinforced by a justice of the peace court that sent another thirty-six constables out into the streets to do what all those others were already doing – nosing around, keeping an eye out, bending an ear, whatever it took to root out the sins and misdemeanours of their servants and neighbours. All office-holders were appointees, and there was a high annual turnover: between 1657 and 1687, about 450 different men stoked the engines of godly discipline in Aberdeen. Even the humble deacons and constables had a taste of the power to bear witness or turn a blind eye, hear confessions and know secrets, punish and forgive: whatever impact godly discipline had on the lower orders, it provided their (slightly) betters with a fruitful exercise in consensus building and male bonding.

Not that the agents of godly discipline didn’t manage to keep busy. Over those thirty years, those 450 men saw to it that at least 629 women were convicted of fornication or adultery (107 of them more than once) on the basis of an unsanctioned pregnancy. Pregnancy featured in ninety-eight per cent of all prosecutions for fornication and adultery. Upwards of ninety per cent of the women were servants, and most were guest-workers, as suggested by the fact that of ninety-four prosecutions for fornication and adultery 1659–1665, only one-third of the pregnancies yielded a baptism in the parish register. Miscarriages, neonatal mortality and evading registration could account for some of the attrition, but court records for Aberdeen and across the country show that a great many of the women convicted of fornication in the cities fled, or more likely returned, to the country to give birth. Since most runaways were likely headed for their home parish, they were easily traced and made to return to undergo church penance and civil punishment in the parish where the sin was committed.

In Aberdeen, the convoluted process of godly discipline helped to nudge unwed mothers-to-be towards wet-nursing in at least two ways: by making them appear before prospective employers in potentially advantageous circumstances, and by imposing financial burdens that made it hard to resist relatively well-paid work as a wet nurse. The story
of a servant named Margaret Rolland offers a case in point. In March, 1685 she was found to be pregnant out of wedlock and was summoned to appear in private before the Aberdeen kirk session. Here, the kirk’s redemptive mission was the key, its insistence upon confession and its dependence upon the compliance and acquiescence of the accused. The interview was the crucial point in the disciplinary proceedings, because only if she offered a detailed confession and a convincing show of contrition and remorse would she be allowed to proceed to the acts of public penance — three shamefaced Sunday appearances on the stool of repentance for a first offence — that would lead to her absolution and reintegration into the community of the faithful.

Margaret Rolland must have made a good impression, because the presiding minister, Dr George Garden, soon hired her to nurse his forthcoming child. She gave birth in May, about the same time as Garden’s wife, and a month later was ensconced in the minister’s household. Garden immediately petitioned the elders to suspend their proceedings against Rolland until after his child was weaned – a courtesy routinely granted employers, but never unwed mothers nursing their own children. Unfortunately, the Gardens’ child died the next spring. Margaret Rolland had to face the congregation sooner than she might have expected, and having made her three appearances she was absolved of her sin in July, 1686, sixteen months after the initial accusation.

Church discipline depended on the cooperation of the accused, but secular punishment was straightforward and decidedly unilateral: female and male fornicators alike faced statutory fines of up to £10 Scots for a first offence, payable in full by the end of the week on pain of a public whipping and banishment if they failed to pay. Because they nearly all earned less money than almost any man, the fine weighed especially heavily on women, and especially women in Aberdeen: in Edinburgh average wages were higher, in Glasgow average fines were lower, but Aberdonian employers and magistrates provided women with a double whammy of low wages and maximum fines. £10 Scots was all the cash, less tips, that senior female domestics in Aberdeen earned in a year, and many women earned less. In 1695 the average wage for female domestics (not including wet nurses) was £8 14s, exclusive of room and board. Some could call on family or draw upon dowry savings for their fine and some had items to pawn, while others borrowed, on terms that elude us, from relatives, friends, lovers, employers, fellow servants, or money-lending merchants. Revenue from the fines was paid back out in the form of pensions for Aberdeen’s ‘deserving poor’. Thus, pregnant servants (most often rural migrants) facing single motherhood, unemployment, loss of earnings, public shaming and mounting debt contributed to urban social services for which neither they nor their children were ever likely to qualify.
Poor women bearing illegitimate children were drawn by their fines deeper into the cash, credit and debt nexus. For domestic servants in Aberdeen faced with repaying the equivalent of a year’s wages, the climb back was especially steep, even without the interruption in employment and the prospect of a new mouth to feed. But the city fathers who fixed the wages and imposed the fines also saw to it that the wage ceiling for wet nurses was £20 per year, double the top wage most single mothers could have earned before their pregnancy, with the prospect of handsome tips from the godparents if the child survived to be weaned. Returning to our friend Margaret Rolland, it is worth noting that her brisk dealings with the justice of the peace court were completed before the critical interview with the kirk session. On 9 March 1685, she and her ne’er-do-well lover (who impregnated two other women over the next few months) were each fined £10 for fornication, and the accounts show that she, like ninety per cent of the women in her circumstances, somehow paid her fine within the week. So when Margaret Rolland met with the minister and elders on 16 March, she had an added financial incentive to make a good impression. And she may well have known that the minister was in the market for a wet nurse.

Live-in wet nurses were a luxury reserved to the very rich in most parts of early modern Europe, but in Aberdeen they could be found in even quite modest households: in 1695, Christian Thomson was a wet nurse in the household of a stonemason in the bottom tax bracket. Eighty couples listed in the poll book that year baptised children in the town: at least twelve of them reported a live-in wet nurse, and wage rates suggest there were as many as nine more. Live-in wet nurses were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of unwed mothers: one-quarter of the women convicted of fornication or adultery in Aberdeen with Margaret Rolland in 1685 were hired as live-in nurses while still on the kirk’s books, but there were surely many other unwed wet nurses who went unrecorded because they had completed their penance before being hired, or because they were convicted in another parish. In 1695, city fathers tried to insist that ‘non of the Inhabitants accept or intertaine any person to be nurses who are guiltie of uncleannes untill they produce ane testifcat bearing ther giveing satsifaction to the Church’, just as in 1609 they had warned parents not to import rural (‘landwart’) wet nurses into the city until they had atoned for ‘thair harlatrie and fornicationes’.

Urban employers seem to have expected exclusive service from their live-in wet nurses. What, then, became of the nurses’ own children? High rates of infant mortality must have claimed many, and abandonment and infanticide may have claimed a few more (though such cases were rarely reported). But what of those who survived? A sixteenth-century minister in Fife warned that some women turned to wet nursing
'not regarding quhat sal become of ther awin', and there is some evidence for this a century later in Aberdeen. Around 1675, Andrew Dempster took his illegitimate child to court with him to complain that the child's mother owed him money. Janet Gordon was a live-in wet nurse employed by one of the magistrates: 'I am but a poor man', claimed Dempster, but 'she hath left the child with me and broken the arme thereof as apparentlie may be sein'. There is no way of knowing how many wet nurses turned their children over to the care of the fathers, but infants needed to be breastfed and if there was no other nursing mother in the family, another, cheaper wet nurse would have to be hired. In Edinburgh, some live-in nurses appear to have turned half or more of their salary over to their own child's nurse, and it seems likely that similar arrangements pertained in Aberdeen and other cities.

Aberdeen's wet nursing regime, then, was the product of four interlocking factors: an illegitimacy rate so high as to ensure a steady supply of lactating single women available to live in; wages so low that even quite modest householders could afford a live-in nurse; fines so high that unwed mothers had to take the best paid work available; and parents who, in light of these material considerations, set aside any scruples they may have had about morally tainted milk. We might also speculate, ever so gingerly, as to whether the ritual of private confession before the ministers and elders, the key moment in the process of godly discipline, might have been understood by at least some prospective employers to have set in train a physical as well as spiritual and moral cleansing of the body, a filtering of sin so thorough as to render the milk of fallen women suitable for the tender infants of respectable parents.

Wet-nursing cannot have been a viable option for all of the newly delivered unwed mothers in early modern Scotland, but it did provide a way for some to rejoin the workforce, repay their fines, and make their own way in the world. Might the wet nursing option have encouraged some single women to become pregnant, or at least to take some sexual risks they might not otherwise have taken? Why not? Is this any less plausible than suggesting that the husbands and fathers who presided over godly discipline so arranged things as to ensure that some unwed mothers had little choice but to become wet nurses? Recovering the story of wet nursing helps us to see that godly discipline (like the modern campaign for family values) encountered, and to some extent generated, countervailing social and economic forces that helped entrench and perpetuate the very behaviours it set out to curb. There was a symbiotic aspect to the whole business, a feedback loop (if you will pardon the pun) that wound through the town and out into the country whence so many servants and wet nurses came, whereby the men sworn to punish illicit sex ended up hiring the women they prosecuted to suckle their own children.
NOTES

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14. For more positive assessments see ibid. 152–53, 200–207; and the unattributed comments of Wiesner, Women and Gender, 50.


16. Ibid. 54–5.


23. C. W. J. Withers, ‘Highland Migration to Aberdeen, c. 1649–1891’, North-
Wet Nurses and Unwed Mothers in 17th-Century Aberdeen


34. ACA, Justice Court Book I(1) and New Register House, OPR 183/3.


36. SRO, CH2/448/19.


38. ACA, Treasury Accounts ii (Mortcloths, 1685/6).


43. ACA, *Justice Court Accounts*.
45. ACA *Justice Court Book* I(1); ACA *Justice Court Accounts*.
46. *List of Pollable Persons*, i, 596.
47. Tyson, ‘Population of Aberdeenshire’, 120; *List of Pollable Persons*.
49. SRO, CH2/448/23 (4 Nov. 1695); *Selections From the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen* ed. John Stuart (Aberdeen, 1846), 69. See also Lindemann, ‘Love for Hire,’ 379.
51. See Deborah A. Symonds, ‘Reconstructing Rural Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Scotland’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 10 (1998). I would like to thank Dr Symonds for providing an advance copy of her article.
52. New Register House, OPR 403/1, 35v, Anstruther Wester Kirk Session Register. I am grateful to Dr Michael Graham for this reference.
53. ACA *Justice Court Book* I(1) 97 (n.d., but bound with 1675).