

'With a Dead Child in her Lap': Bad Mothers and Infant Mortality in George Egerton's Discords

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In an article of 1894 reflecting back on 'A Century of Feminine Fiction', a writer for *All the Year Round* lamented the demise of morality and conventionality in the modern novel: 'the fin-de-siècle female novelist can scarcely be congratulated on her 'delicate wit' or 'pure moral feeling' ... she revels in 'risky' subjects, and loves to deal with them in the most risky fashion'.¹ One of the riskiest subjects which the fiction of the 1890s addressed was the death of children and its social implications, reflecting contemporary concerns about working mothers and the costs of bringing up children. Whereas infant mortality still evoked a set of assumptions about working-class life, disease and squalid domestic conditions, the New Woman plot lingered on the modern heroine's antipathy towards motherhood, suggesting that performing the role of mother interfered with her desire to work and her friendships with other women. Ella Hepworth Dixon's 1894 novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, centres on the heroine's struggles to sustain herself both financially and emotionally through her writing, implying that the modern woman selects work over sexuality and motherhood. Constructing the story of the modern woman became a major concern of the New Woman writer. As Jane Eldridge Miller has argued, 'what was most new about New Woman novels were their heroines'; they sought to depict women engaged in personal rebellion and the challenging of social norms, seeking alternative social and sexual lifestyles.² For George Egerton, renowned for her short story collections with their frank and subversive expressions of female sexuality, the 'maternal instinct' provided both a potent source of female fulfilment and a way of exploring issues relating to women's economic dependency on men. I shall

be discussing the correlations between Egerton's unmarried heroines in *Discords* and the representations of working-class mothers in George Moore's *Esther Waters*, published in 1894, showing how the contemporary practices of baby-farming and infanticide contributed to fictional representations of bad motherhood and the economic vulnerability of women.

Medical and Social Views of Motherhood

In the 1890s motherhood was an intensely topical issue, as anxieties about the falling birthrate and the future of the race precipitated a moral panic about woman's ambivalent attitudes to childbearing and the responsibilities it entailed. With the rise of the eugenics movement which aimed to improve racial purity by promoting 'fit' motherhood and healthy offspring, it was recognised that 'the standards of mothers must be improved' and the concept of motherhood made to seem 'more desirable'.³ Britain's imperialist vision was threatened by a new generation of women who were increasingly seeking to limit the size of their families. As Lucy Bland has argued, this trend towards family limitation was linked in public discourse to 'the invidious effects of feminism', as middle-class women were perceived to be "shirking" their "racial" duty to breed' by selecting careers or higher education over motherhood.⁴ Working-class women were also criticised for their attempts to combine bringing up children with employment;⁵ factory workers were singled out as particular offenders in this area, frequently leaving children in the care of others in order to bring in a wage to keep them alive. In 1891 the Factory Act prohibited women from returning to factory work within a month of confinement, indicative of more general attempts to regulate married women's employment in the early days of the growing child-welfare movement.⁶ Despite the eugenicists' attempts to glorify and purify the maternal role, what became known as the 'elevation of motherhood',⁷ by the turn of the century the increase in 'bad' mothers who worked outside the home and 'unnatural' women who rejected motherhood altogether suggested that Victorian ideals of family life were in crisis.⁸

It has been suggested by Anna Davin that in this period 'the ideology of motherhood transcended class, even though its components had different class origins'.⁹ Certainly, it was by no means a particular social group which was exclusively targeted by eugenicists, doctors, feminists, politicians and government officials, as the links forged between the maternal instinct, economics and social identity were being explored in relation to all women. Both working-class women and middle-class New Women were blamed for their antipathy towards motherhood as the state of modern femininity was singled out as the source of social danger. Historians of child murder have noted that celebrated cases such as the trial and execution of Margaret Waters for baby-farming in 1870 enabled the construction of 'the dichotomy between natural motherhood and bad anti-mothers' to spread from medical discourse to

achieve wider cultural significance, so that it could be implied that 'all mothers were suspect' and needed policing.¹⁰ Fears of maternal deviance, of the 'bad anti-mother', did not die down after the 1870s as has sometimes been assumed, but remained constant and extended to include women from all walks of life. As Jill L. Matus has argued in her reading of the medical regulation of maternal deviance in the 1860s, 'the discourse of maternal instinct and its perversions serves to inscribe class differences as differences among women, and to naturalise the distinctions between middle-class mothers and deviant others'.¹¹ Debates about the maternal instinct could not then be divorced from questions of class and economics, yet transgressions from the maternal norm were liable to be judged in terms of a more generalised deviant femininity which did transcend class boundaries.

Anti-feminist vilification of the New Woman concentrated on her rejection of maternity, which was widely perceived to be unnatural. Eliza Lynn Linton complained that such women 'repudiate [marriage] as a one-sided tyranny; and maternity, for which, after all, women primarily exist, they regard as degradation'.¹² Grant Allen related this feeling on the part of 'modern women agitators' to the unsexing of women and the destabilisation of gender boundaries. He argued vehemently, 'Women ought ... to glory in their femininity. A woman ought to be ashamed to say she has no desire to become a wife and mother.'¹³ As the actions of unmarried middle-class women violated the codes of what was construed as 'natural' or 'normal' femininity, such women seemed much closer to their working-class sisters, tired of the burden of perpetual childbearing and unwanted children. The debate around motherhood questioned the validity of traditional Victorian family values, suggesting that working women, for example, might lead more fulfilling lives than full-time mothers and that a spinster's life was not as sterile as many imagined. To the conservative mind, femininity without maternity was like a summer without sun, unnatural beyond belief. As *All the Year Round* proclaimed with vigour, 'Either a woman is a woman, and proves it by fulfilling the functions which she was sent into the world to fulfil, or she is what? – a nameless thing, a freak of nature'.¹⁴ Female identity was also inseparable from maternity in the words of Eliza Lynn Linton, who proposed:

The *raison d'être* of a woman is maternity ... The continuance of the race in healthy reproduction, together with the fit nourishment and care of the young after birth, is the ultimate end of women as such; and whatever tells against these functions, and reduces either her power or her perfectness, is an offence against nature and a wrong done to society.¹⁵

Burdened with sole responsibility for the 'continuance of the race', women who declined to be mothers not only sinned against themselves but against 'nature' and 'society', by neglecting to care for children. Female power could

only be achieved through observance of such duties. Even those who purported to be on the New Woman's side expressed some uneasiness about her tendency to 'neglect homes and children for the sake of amusement'.¹⁶ One of the lone voices of support for this antipathy to maternity, Mona Caird, pointed out that, unlike men, women had to choose between a family and work in the brave new world of occupations for women. She suggested that, 'We shall never have really good mothers until women cease to make their motherhood the central idea of their existence.'¹⁷ But neglecting maternal duties invariably placed the New Woman in proximity to the careless street-walker or those women using contraception or abortion, who were able to enjoy their sexualities without fear of conception. The increased emphasis on sexual pleasure both within and outside marriage at this time meant that 'women were indulging in sex without any intention to procreate and so were detaching sexuality firmly from reproduction',¹⁸ as methods of family limitation ensured that to a certain extent, motherhood did become a choice. Although contraception was not openly supported by many feminists, it did carry some associations with women's rights and the sexual and economic independence of the New Woman.¹⁹ As Henrietta Muller argued in her 1887 speech to the Men and Women's Club about 'The Limitation of the Family', 'the interests of woman, child and society cannot be secured until and unless the mother can regulate and control conception'.²⁰

The New Woman effectively transposed her feelings of horror at the political disability of women onto the notion of children, rejecting motherhood as the epitome of social subjection. Anti-feminist propaganda seized on the figure of the dead baby as an example of the callousness of the New Woman, whose 'strong opinions' were associated with the premature death of others, in the view of a writer for *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1888. It was claimed that 'glorified spinsters' amongst other things privately discussed 'the advantages of a state-regulated infanticide', as if killing children were to become part of a new feminist constitution.²¹ It was in this context that class boundaries were threatened as constructing New Women as infanticidal mothers partially erased their differences from working-class women, a strategy repeated in other forms of feminist discourse. As Mrs Roy Devereux argued in her anti-marriage tract, *The Ascent of Woman* (1896), the maternal instinct was in decline:

[The woman of today] is the very antithesis of the one unceasing mother whose reckless fertility ruined her mentally and physically at thirty ... already she has seen enough to make her recoil with horror from the heedless motherhood which was accounted the glory of the instinctive woman.²²

This suggested that childbearing constituted an attack on female health which women were no longer prepared to endure, as it was not socially recognised. Categories such as 'the woman of today' and 'the instinctive

woman' also exist outside definitions of class, as both poor women and middle-class spinsters are implicated in the rejection of a lifetime of pregnancies. The terms of feminist protest were to be used in one of Egerton's stories, which also suggests that 'the one unceasing mother' is an ideal for all classes: in 'Virgin Soil', Florence, the runaway wife, claims that *all* married women become 'mere bearers of children conceived in a sense of duty, not love. They bear them, birth them, nurse them, and begin again without choice in the matter, growing old, unlovely, with all joy of living swallowed in a senseless burden of reckless maternity' (155).²³ The reaction against women as child-bearing 'machines' is then common to all 'women of today' but particularly married ones.²⁴ However, by constructing herself as an 'antithesis' to motherhood, the New Woman was liable to be judged in terms of deviancy, absorbing the criticism levelled at those 'bad anti-mothers' who will resort to desperate measures in order to limit the family.

Limiting the Family: Abortion, Infanticide and Baby-Farming in the 1890s

The tirade against irresponsible mothers in the 1890s was partly galvanised by the publication of statistics, which revealed that infant mortality rates 'remained at what contemporaries regarded as an unacceptably high level'.²⁵ In 1899 the rate for England and Wales was 163 out of every 1000 births, higher than the average for the decade (154) and the average for the 1880s (142).²⁶ Rather than contextualising the high rate in terms of poverty, poor housing, inadequate provisions for single mothers and the contamination of milk supplies, it was explained in terms of maternal inadequacy; as Ellen Ross suggests, 'accusations of neglect, ignorance, and even deliberate infanticide run as a *leitmotiv* through official discussions of working-class infant health'.²⁷ Discourses on abortion, infanticide, baby-farming and contraception drew on a set of common assumptions about the maternal instinct, illegitimacy and woman's nature and the differences between the four practices were often ignored, so that a woman's capacity to kill children could be confused with her desire to limit her fertility or to leave children in the care of others. Carol Smart has addressed the links between practices involving the death of children and family limitation at this time, and puts forward the theory that 'the decline in infanticide would seem to be linked to the increased availability of safer abortions'.²⁸ Patricia Knight also claims that abortion was widespread in working-class districts in the 1890s and appeared to be increasing.²⁹ Abortifacients, or 'feminine pills', were advertised in the press, much to the outrage of the *British Medical Journal*, which stated disapprovingly that 'remedies' for so-called cases of 'obstinate obstruction' and for the limitation of families are freely advocated'.³⁰ Moreover, poor women were prepared to part with a substantial amount of money to secure their respectability and freedom. Unable to understand the women's desire to

distance themselves from the restrictions of large families, the medical profession was outraged that money could be wasted on such 'female medicines'.³¹ The increased concern about abortion in the medical press exacerbated the vilification of working-class mothers as unnatural, even though the 'extensive sale of the most expensive abortion remedies' provided evidence that 'a good deal of discreet middle-class abortion' was probably also taking place.³² Feminist historians have noted the correlations between the rise in abortions and 'women's desire for autonomy',³³ even suggesting that it was 'very much part of female sub-culture'.³⁴ Buying out of motherhood in such a way testified to women's refusal to submit to the endless round of bearing and nursing children, though again the immorality surrounding this practice meant that it could not be openly condoned by feminists.³⁵

Making a case for infanticide as a woman's right is clearly more difficult. Nineteenth-century commentators made the connection between infanticide and illegitimacy which was based on 'certain common assumptions about unmarried mothers as well as coroners' reports and judicial statistics'.³⁶ However the decline of illegitimacy in the last quarter of the century prompted an exploration of potential correlations between economic hardship and killing children; more married women were attempting the act.³⁷ Judith Knelman has discussed the case of Amy Gregory, a laundress convicted for the murder of her baby in 1895, who evoked sympathy in the press because of the 'grim hardships which had transformed the instincts of a mother into the mad passion of a murderess'.³⁸ One of the questions she asks in her study of the English murderess is 'Could harsh economic reality pervert the maternal instinct?', a question which is to echo through representations of motherhood throughout the century.³⁹ Lionel Rose corroborates the economic narrative of infanticide, arguing that it cannot be separated from 'the economic and sexual vulnerability of women', particularly the domestic servants who risked instant dismissal without references at the first signs of pregnancy.⁴⁰ Many mothers chose to die with their children, perhaps signifying their inability to conceive of a life without maternal roles, or alternatively their attempts to 'rescue' the family from poverty. Press reports of the murder of children rarely offered an explicit commentary on maternity but sought to locate the crime in the poverty of the mother and the strains of her domestic life. Escaping the workhouse through death, Jane Kershaw took her children with her, as if to avoid leaving them in the care of others:

On Saturday, at the same village of Earlsheaton, near Dewsbury, a letter, which was fastened in the ground by a long hairpin, a woman's hat, and two babies' feeding bottles were found near the side of a dam ... The dam was dragged, with the result that the dead bodies of Jane Kershaw, single woman, and her twin children, 13 weeks old, were discovered within a few yards of each other. The young woman had been in the workhouse at

Dewsbury, but left that institution on Tuesday last. On Thursday she told someone she had intended to drown herself during the previous night, but that she was prevented by somebody watching her.⁴¹

Rather like some contemporary readings of the Ripper murders, there is a suggestion that the crimes occurred because the 'single woman' left the protective enclosure of the workhouse and therefore withdrew from organised society. Ann Higginbotham suggests that similar cases emphasise 'the difficulties of the single mother', who finds it harder to cope with bringing up children than the deserted wife but whose feelings may be at least as strong as those of the 'legitimate' mother.⁴² The feeding bottles found at the edge of the dam link the mother's crime to her refusal to feed her babies. There is a suggestion that the mother is working as a wet-nurse and therefore unable to breast-feed her babies, which means the feeding bottles may have contained the 'contaminated and adulterated milk normally on sale in working-class districts'.⁴³ This underlines the economic explanation for her crime, whilst also implying that she falls into the category of 'bad anti-mother' on several grounds. The leniency towards infanticides towards the end of the century reflects the acceptance of the validity of such economic explanations, though the get-out clause of insanity did tend to harness female violence to assumptions about maternal deviance, as well as failing to confront the plight of the single mother.⁴⁴

The associations between single or working mothers, and the deaths of children were strengthened by a continuing concern with baby-farming, as discourses on bad motherhood obscured the need to address state provision of child care facilities. Although the main baby-farming scandals had taken place in the 1860s and early 1870s, attempts to regulate child care and to legislate against the provision of nursing services had not resulted in the expected fall in infant mortality, and women were still being executed for baby-farming up to the turn of the century.⁴⁵ Lionel Rose has discussed several instances of the maltreatment of infants, detailing the way in which predominantly working-class mothers, particularly those in domestic service, left their children in the hands of disreputable midwives with the (perhaps unspoken) intention of allowing them to waste away under their care.⁴⁶ The public denunciation of working mothers from servants to factory workers who had to pay for child care also meant that there was renewed interest in the activities of baby-farmers and their clients, as motherhood moved into the public sphere.⁴⁷ The practice of baby-farming fanned the flames of anxieties about maternal conduct, introducing the question of the 'cash nexus' into a supposedly private, domestic duty and unsettling received notions of nursing and child care.⁴⁸ As Arnot perceptively points out, 'the label baby-farmer was used to condemn and marginalize child-carers at a time when strong pressure was coming from the middle class for working-class women to spend all their time caring for children, their menfolk and the home'.⁴⁹ In

a situation where children are ‘unwanted’, nursing is branded as a dangerous occupation rather than as the essence of womanhood; at a time when male obstetricians were gaining control over the birth process, the ability to dispose of babies was a dark reversal of the aims of medicine.

Fears about the dangerous working-class mother were compounded with the baby-farming scare, as both mother and baby-farmer conspired to take an infant’s life by neglecting the duties required for its care. An article on its prevention in the *Lancet* of 1891 detailed the ‘ghastly reality’ of the baby-farming process:

Legally fatherless, practically motherless, many thousands of children annually born in this country are from birth intended for other than parental keeping. In many cases they are parted with in order that they may be forgotten. The ‘nurse’ understands this, and she will, for a suitable remuneration, ... guarantee their disappearance ... thus the inconvenient infant is transferred and absorbed into obscurity. Then follows the well-known process of neglect, starvation, and death.⁵⁰

In this scheme of things, all the ‘natural’ processes involved in raising children are subverted into cruelty: children live apart from their parents with a ‘nurse’ who aspires to kill her charges. The inverted commas around ‘nurse’ destabilise the whole enterprise of child care, ensuring that infants become ‘inconvenient’ and ‘forgotten’, and mothers have practically no claim to the label beyond the biological. It is interesting that the piece mentions the lack of a father, given the usual attempts to downplay paternal responsibility for illegitimate children.⁵¹ Most significantly, babies farmed out to such nurses were deprived of milk, like Jane Kershaw’s twins whose feeding bottles were forever out of reach. In 1892, Alice Hockley was charged with sharing a baby’s daily allowance of one pint with ‘four other persons’, causing the ‘pitiable wreck’ to succumb to an early death.⁵² With the odds stacked against them from the moment of their delivery, babies born under ‘needy circumstances’ were sacrificed on the altar of female indifference, testifying to the changing needs of a lower class prepared to pay to dispose of the perpetual motherhood which held it in submission. What was perhaps more worrying was the extent of the ‘neglect’ uncovered by police, medical men and charity workers; investigations into baby-farming also served to mobilise a broader ‘discourse of neglect’ which targeted all working-class women. The definition of infanticide was widened to include a new category of ‘infanticide by neglect’, referring to deaths due to maternal ignorance or carelessness, rather than active violence.⁵³ The baby-farming scandal then tapped into late-Victorian fears about the evolution of the modern woman and the dangers of working mothers, questioning the endurance of the maternal instinct. Similarly, the alarm over abortion and infanticide figures gathered impetus from the links forged between violence and female work; if earning

a living meant disposing of children, then the dead baby became a sign of modernity, indicative of the links between economics and maternity at the turn of the century.

Egerton's Representation of the Maternal Instinct

The narrative of economic hardship which underwrote reports of infanticide and baby-farming meant that the fictionalised death of children invited interpretations based on the social and economic circumstances of the mother. In the fiction of the 1890s violence towards children and maternal neglect and indifference featured prominently, providing both a 'risky' subject to boost sales figures and a profound commentary on women's search for economic and emotional fulfilment. In the vampire fiction of the period, writers explored the notion that monstrous women attacked other women's children out of frustration at being childless, and possibly barren, themselves. The vampire novel also specifically implicated the sexually active woman, the 'demonic mother', in the death of children, as female vampires by definition were denied the pleasures of marriage and motherhood. Scenes of seduction instigated by voluptuous women are often juxtaposed with women attacking children: in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the three vampire women are given children to bite to prevent them from biting Jonathan, and the undead Lucy Westenra delights in sucking the blood of children. The vampiric Harriet Brandt in Florence Marryat's novel, *The Blood of the Vampire* (1895), promises to be 'the best nurse' Margaret's baby has ever had, where the baby's untimely death seems to comment on the mother's capacity to leave it in the hands of unscrupulous nurses. Women are shown to be unable to cope with the demands of nursing and resentful of their children's demands and weaknesses. Infanticide and emotional distress are explored in Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins' play, *Alan's Wife* (1893), in which the young mother, widowed at the beginning of the play, kills her child out of horror at its deformity and is executed defending her one courageous act at the end; motherhood is no substitute for her intense sexual love for her dead husband. The fascination with the trials of motherhood then extended across diverse late-Victorian genres, as a means of addressing the relationship between femininity, sexual desire and economic inadequacy.

In many ways the New Woman novel intersects with what came to be known as the 'new realism', those tales of working-class hardship popularised by writers such as Gissing, Zola and Hardy at the turn of the century. George Moore's *Esther Waters* exhibits a similar preoccupation with maternity and childbirth, focussing on the unmarried mother battling against the inequities of poverty and social prejudice. It includes frank descriptions of the pain of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as a detailed account of the heroine's experiences with a potentially murderous baby-farmer. Incessant childbearing is hailed as the curse of the working-class woman and the source

of economic hardship in Moore's novel. Esther's ailing mother admits, 'I've 'ad a terrible time of it lately, and them babies allus coming. Ah, we poor women have more than our right to bear with ... It is the children that breaks us poor women down altogether' (96).⁵⁴ However, Moore emphasises the generation gap between mother and daughter with the simultaneity of their pregnancies: Esther's mother rightly believes that she will not survive her confinement and that her baby will die, whereas Esther's determination seems to guarantee the health of her son, who bears the physical signs of his father's virility and athleticism.

Moore's handling of the topical issue of baby-farming may have contributed to the novel's reputation as an immoral read; his novels were frequently withdrawn from Mudie's library and he conducted a life-long battle against censorship.⁵⁵ Yet his work was recognised by reviewers to be 'eminently moral',⁵⁶ perhaps because it ultimately confirmed the endurance of the maternal instinct: in the *Athenaeum's* review of the literature of 1894, it was praised for its handling of 'the elemental human affection, the love of mother for child'.⁵⁷ In the novel, Moore pointed the finger at the practice of wet-nursing as the cause of the increase in demand for baby-farmers. As Esther's savings are used to finance her sister's emigration, she leaves her baby with a baby-farmer and acts as wet-nurse for the sickly child of the affluent Mrs Rivers, suckling her employer's baby instead of her own. Whilst it is suggested that working-class women are physiologically formed to nurse healthy children – the text lingers on Esther's breasts and the fact that she produces enough milk to suckle twins – their children's lives are threatened by their lack of financial resources, not by their lack of natural, maternal love. Esther asks, 'By what right, by what law, was she separated from her child?' (146) as she soothes the unease of her employer about her child. Discourses on maternal neglect do not extend to Mrs Rivers' refusal to take responsibility for her child, as wet-nursing is a recognised legal practice, intended to guarantee a healthy race; she admits that 'she was doing no more than a hundred other fashionable women were doing at the same moment' (150). In this context both working-class wet-nurses and middle-class women are open to charges of maternal deviance; as Matus has argued, 'the wet-nurse ... could be seen as polluting the home of middle-class mothers, encouraging them in the loss of their maternal capacities'.⁵⁸

However, Esther's impassioned speech on the untimely deaths of working-class children specifically implicates the fashionable New Woman in the practice of infanticide:

But when you hire a poor girl such as me to give the milk that belongs to another to your child, you think nothing of the poor deserted one. He is only a love-child, you say, and had better be dead and done with ... fine folks like you pays the money, and Mrs Spires and her like gets rid of the poor little things. Change the milk a few times, a little neglect, and the poor

servant-girl is spared the trouble of bringing up her baby and can make a handsome child of the rich woman's little starveling. (151)

The text then outlines the class implications of the separation of mothers and children, as the raising of healthy babies depends upon the deaths of neglected and undernourished working-class infants. Cancelling out illegitimacy and the signs of illicit sexual liaisons, the neglect of the baby-farmer effectively promotes a healthy race ensuring that the sickly child of rich parents is nourished by the milk of the fitter working-class girl. As Richard Allen Cave has argued, the baby-farming incidents provide 'a powerful nightmare symbol of the condition of the poor generally with its patterns of extortion and victimization'.⁵⁹ To the baby-farmer herself, the deaths of lower-class children are essential in perpetuating this economy built on the exchange of milk and money. Maternal feeling is converted into the satisfaction of earning money, as the unwanted child restricts the servant-girl's economic potential. As Mrs Spires philosophically proclaims, children are 'an expense and a disgrace' (155) and her 'wilful neglect' is no more than a welcome response to the servant-girl's 'wish [the babies] had never been born' (154).

The relationship of maternity to female fulfilment in 1890s fiction remained uncertain, variously represented as a burden and the source of regenerative female power. Moore's baby-farmer loses no opportunity to point out what she calls 'the fleeting affection of the ordinary young mother, which, though ardent at first, gives way under difficulties' (156). However, despite, or perhaps because of, severe economic hardship, Esther's maternal love is enduring and never falters from the moment she first holds her baby and feels that 'she must die of happiness' as 'her senses swooned with love' (126).⁶⁰ In Egerton's stories this overwhelming and absorbing feeling seems unachievable but also potentially dangerous to individuality and personal development. She includes motherhood in the idealistic manifesto of the New Woman who will be regenerated by her work and her closeness to her fellow female workers; it is very much associated with female fulfilment outside marriage. Critics have tended to suggest that her stories 'valorise' motherhood,⁶¹ using as evidence readings of her most famous story, 'A Cross Line', which ends with the heroine's realisation of her impending pregnancy and her consequent rejection of sexual passion with her lover, as the passionate woman 'commits herself to motherhood'.⁶² The celebration of the maternal instinct also features in 'The Spell of the White Elf', which dwells on the development of the emotional bond between an educated but barren woman and the child she adopts; caring for the child and learning the 'baby talk' which her maid finds so easy is shown to be much more satisfying than the writing and lecturing of the New Woman. In 'The Regeneration of Two', from her later collection *Discords*, the poet figure objects to the fashionable woman's abhorrence of motherhood. He claims, 'When I spoke to her of little children she looked bored, for little children spoil one's figure and dim

the lustre of one's eyes' (193). However, the heroine suggests that the modern woman's 'disinclination to burden [herself] with motherhood' is a progression from the time when women were 'just the child-bearing half of humanity and no more' (199). As Lyn Pykett has argued, 'in Egerton's work sexual and maternal feeling are both woman's glory and her curse'.⁶³ Sally Ledger's assertion that 'Many of Egerton's women are psychologically and emotionally "driven" by maternity' is also helpful,⁶⁴ as it is often their inability to express their maternal feelings rather than the valorisation of maternity which is addressed. Her fiction seeks to negotiate the potential differences between the maternal inadequacies of the working-class mother and the New Woman's disinclination towards maternity, exposing the links between bad mothering, class and male sexual exploitation.

Assumptions about unmarried mothers and the deviancy of women who drink are mobilised in both 'Wedlock' and 'Gone Under', which seek to locate the death of children within a narrative of economic hardship. Egerton was heavily criticised for her treatment of dead children in *Discords*, which went beyond the limits of the 'new licence in dealing imaginatively with life' which the short story proclaimed.⁶⁵ An *Athenaeum* reviewer spluttered, 'Gone Under' and 'Wedlock' are simply revolting studies of drink and lust and murder (there is no use in mincing matters), and should never have been printed';⁶⁶ significantly these are the two tales from the collection which deal explicitly with motherhood and infant mortality. In *Discords*, circumstances conspire to facilitate the severing of the mother-child bond, though the mother's deviant behaviour is also emphasised – the women who lose their children are often drunk or out of control. In 'Wedlock', the 'boozed' and battered heroine tells her lodger of the illegitimate daughter that was taken away from her, the 'dear little thing' whose physical appearance – 'milk-white' skin and 'china-blue' eyes (130) – was a source of pride to her doting mother. As Mrs Jones was working as a cook when she fell pregnant, she paid her step-sister to look after the child whilst she returned to employment. She is then tricked into marriage by Jones who uses discourses of maternal neglect to keep her child out of his family: "E says I would neglect 'is children, an' 'e called 'er names an' says 'e won't 'ave no bastard round with 'is children' (131). Maternal deviance is clearly signalled by the woman's drunkenness and her expressions of hatred and violence towards her step-children; her lodger overhears her hitting one of them and even fears that 'the woman is smothering the child in the bed-clothes' (129). This emphasises the carelessness of working-class mothers who were allegedly suffocating their children by 'overlaying', from the habit of children sleeping with their parents due to over-crowding and poor housing.⁶⁷ The reader becomes involved in the complex process of accounting for maternal deviance, mediating between the unfeeling comments of the bricklayer who thinks her 'a noice mother fur iz kids' (118) and the woman's heartfelt plea, 'Don't think me a bad woman, miss!' (130).

The death of the illegitimate child then facilitates the representation of the neglectful, working-class anti-mother, even as Egerton seems to repeat the plea that we should revise our assumptions about bad women. Arriving late at the funeral in an inappropriate pink gown, Mrs Jones's supposed lack of maternal instinct is of a piece with her disregard for social customs. It appears as if she has enlisted the services of a careless baby-farmer, effectively paying for her child's death. However, the poignant scene in which the mother nurses the dead child that she could not afford to bring up herself suggests that it is poverty which has prevented her from fulfilling her duty as a mother:

She is crooning a nonsense song she used to sing to her when she was quite a baby, and the listening women place, but fear to go in. For a long hour they hear her talking and singing to it; then the man comes to screw down the lid, and they find her on the sofa with the dead child on her lap, its feet, in their white cotton socks, sticking out like the legs of a great wax doll. She lets them take it from her without a word and watches them place it amongst the white frills, and lets them lead her out of the room (138)

Unresponsive to maternal love, the dead child indexes the social failings of the bereaved mother, branding her as involved in the production of illegitimacy and implicating her in infanticide; in this context the rightful place of children is in coffins, rather than on their mother's lap. The report of a mother's drowning of her baby printed in an edition of *The Times* from July 1888 uses almost the same phrase – 'with a dead child in her lap' – to gloss the practice of child-killing.⁶⁸ Once again, infanticide springs from economic necessity; the woman and her family are in 'very needy circumstances' and cannot afford to raise the child. The singing signals the maternal bond which was severed by the unmarried mother's need to work; such women cannot protest about their children being taken away. It is also significant that Jones fails to pass on the news of the child's illness as well as having refused to support it financially, suggesting that lack of paternal responsibility may underscore infant mortality. The shocking end to the story in which the drunken heroine murders her abusive step-children can be read as an attack on 'legitimate' children and their inadequate fathers, though it does seem to confirm links between alcoholism and maternal violence. Ledger argues that 'the griefs of 'illegitimate' motherhood drive [the heroine] mad'.⁶⁹ More important than the explanation of insanity is the notion that poor mothers become bad because of their economic dependency on men and an unsympathetic social system.

The feminist agenda of blaming men for women's departure from the model of the good mother is again taken up in 'Gone Under', where another drunken heroine, Edith, struggles against her suicidal tendencies and loss of control after the death of her child. As in 'Wedlock', the focus of the story is

a dialogue between a childless New Woman and an unmarried mother who has suffered the loss of a child. This allows the New Woman to take up the eugenic strategy of the ‘elevation of motherhood’:

I think the *only divine* fibre in a woman is her maternal instinct. Every good quality she has is consequent or coexistent with that. Suppress it, and it turns to a fibroid, sapping all that is healthful and good in her nature, for I have seen it – we had many girls in the office ... Every woman ought to have a little child, if only as a moral educator. I have often thought that a woman who mothers a bastard, and endeavours bravely to rear it decently, is more to be commended than the society wife who contrives to shirk her motherhood (100–1)

The office worker’s celebration of the ‘brave endeavour’ of unmarried motherhood over the New Woman’s shirking of her maternal duty does not take account of class, nor the continuing stigma of illegitimacy. It is only childless women who speak out in favour of motherhood in Egerton’s stories, as the maternal instinct becomes distorted by economic realities.⁷⁰ As Barbara Brookes argues in her discussion of women’s decisions to limit births, ‘The rhetoric praising motherhood was at odds with women’s experience of maternity’.⁷¹ The working woman may refuse to believe that Edith is a bad woman, but her confessions of sexual indulgence and her drunkenness again prepare the reader for her responsibility for the death of her child.

However, Egerton makes a stronger feminist point in this story by underlining the man’s involvement in his child’s death so that maternal instinct is forbidden by men’s desire to opt out of paternity and its pressures. The illegitimate child of the heroine is classified as ‘still-born’ after a delivery under anaesthetic effected by a ‘she-devil’ at a notorious establishment.⁷² Egerton portrays the baby’s death as the outcome of a conspiracy between doctor and lover, which emphasises the woman’s lack of choice about the delivery. Edith calls for her baby and then mistakes her dripping breast-milk for its tears, craving an emotional bond which is forbidden by society. Crawling into the adjoining room after the birth, the distraught mother discovers ‘a bundle’ which is her dead baby lying on the floor. Murdered children were often concealed in ‘bundles’ to be discovered in advanced stages of decomposition.⁷³ She relates, ‘I couldn’t believe it was dead. I kissed it and tried to warm it, and I put it inside my nightgown between my breasts’ (99). Both stories imply that it is only when the baby is dead, that maternal feelings can be expressed. Edith’s inability to breast-feed her child again evokes the practices of wet-nursing and baby-farming, highlighting her status as an unmarried mother. Images of infanticide, illegitimacy and baby-farming cluster around the figure of the mother, who is upbraided for her failings, even when the death happens independently of her actions. The mother’s inability to feed or warm her baby is compounded by her imaginative appreciation of its need

to be loved: 'I could feel it at night groping about for me, and the chill of its poor little hands clung to me' (100). Deprived of her maternal role and the economic support of marriage, Edith eventually turns to prostitution, and describes the soothing pleasures of alcohol both as a way of coping with social pressures and as a form of infanticide: 'I drank to kill it' (102). As the deaths of children precipitate condemnation of bad mothers, the question of illegitimacy can then be obscured, though Egerton does clearly signal the political subtext to infant mortality.⁷⁴

In order to contest fixed notions of 'natural' motherhood, Egerton's narratives provided a variety of perspectives on the maternal instinct, focusing particularly on the difficulties of unmarried mothers and the feelings of fashionable single women eager to opt out of motherhood. Drawing on contemporary discourses on bad motherhood in debates around abortion, infanticide, baby-farming and wet-nursing, both she and George Moore reinforced the economic aspects of child care and the lack of state provision for working mothers. Her stories serve to reinscribe the links between class and motherhood and to suggest that common assumptions about maternal deviance and neglect worked to open up 'a space for the vilification of whole groups of women'.⁷⁵ I would suggest that Egerton recognised the modern woman's horror of endless reproduction, yet ultimately represented the death of children as a far from liberating experience for women. Her stories insist that the economic realities of motherhood and infant mortality cannot be ignored.

Notes

1 'A Century of Feminine Fiction', *All the Year Round*, 3rd, Series 12 (1894), 537–40 (p. 539).

2 J. E. Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London, 1994), p. 14. Miller goes on to concentrate on the New Woman novelist's treatment of sexuality as the real innovation, suggesting that 'the New Woman novelist did try to create a new kind of feminine ideal, one which allowed for women's intellectual abilities and sexuality, and privileged sexual knowledge, not sexual ignorance' (p. 15).

3 A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, 5 (1978), 9–66 (p. 13).

4 L. Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 226.

5 Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', p. 24.

6 B. Brookes, 'Women and Reproduction, 1860–1939' in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1986), p. 154.

7 Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', p. 23. At the beginning of the twentieth century this overlapped with the 'endowment of motherhood', which was the 'demand for financial recognition by the state that mothers' work rearing children contributed to the good of society'. The glorification of motherhood, it was felt, could also be achieved by educating working-class mothers into their duties and responsibilities by the production and dissemination of pamphlets about child care,

systems of home-visiting by charity workers and the formation of such institutions as the St Pancras School for Mothers. See Davin, pp. 24–27, 36–43.

8 C. Smart, 'Disruptive Bodies and Unruly Sex: The Regulation of Reproduction and Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century' in C. Smart (ed.), *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* (London and New York, 1992), p. 23.

9 Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', pp. 13–14.

10 M. L. Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State: The Baby-farming Scandal and the First Infant Life Protection Legislation of 1872', *Continuity and Change*, 9:2 (1994), 271–311 (p. 280). See also J. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 162–74, for her discussion of the vilification of baby-farmers in the press, where they are frequently represented as witches and monsters.

11 J. L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester, 1995), p. 157.

12 E. L. Linton, 'The Wild Women as Politicians', *Nineteenth Century*, 30 (1891), 79–88 (p. 79).

13 G. Allen, 'Plain Words on the Woman Question', *Fortnightly Review*, N.S. 46 (1889), 448–58 (p. 452). For a relevant discussion of Allen's views on motherhood both in this article and in his novel, *The Woman who Did* (1895), in the wider context of the New Woman writers' 'eroticization of maternity', see Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, 1990), pp. 92–94.

14 'Women's Rights' (indexed as 'Belligerent Women'), *All the Year Round*, 3rd Series, 12 (1894), 150–56 (p. 155).

15 Linton, 'The Wild Women as Politicians', p. 80.

16 N. Arling, 'What is the Role of the 'New Woman?', *Westminster Review*, 150 (1898), 576–87 (p. 585).

17 M. Caird, 'A Defense of the So-Called "Wild Women"', *Nineteenth Century*, 31 (1892), 811–29 (p. 819).

18 Brookes, 'Women and Reproduction', p. 166. She cites a doctor's opinion from the *British Medical Journal* of 1932 that women's assertion of bodily integrity by such practices as abortion and contraception was 'feminism run mad'.

19 See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 195–97, for a discussion of the perceived immorality of contraception and feminist opposition to it, on the grounds that it might subject women to men's lust. C. Dyhouse has offered a contrasting view of feminist attitudes to birth control, suggesting that though feminists may have found it difficult to articulate their opinions on the subject, they were 'by no means in the main opposed'. See Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880–1939* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 171–73.

20 Men and Women's Club Papers, abstract of Henrietta Muller's Paper on the Limitation of the Family (read on 9 May 1887) in Pearson Collection, University College, London (10/11). Quoted in Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, p. 174.

21 'The Glorified Spinster', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 58 (1888), 371–76 (p. 371).

22 Mrs R. Devereux, *The Ascent of Woman* (London, 1896), pp. 47–48.

23 G. Egerton, *Keynotes & Discords*, ed. Martha Vicinus (1894; London, 1983). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

24 The description of women as 'machines for the production of superfluous children' was used by the feminist Emma Brooke in her correspondence with the eugenicist Karl Pearson in 1886. She also claimed that it was essential that motherhood became a choice, as it was clear that some women dreaded the birth of children. See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 214, 28–29.

25 G. K. Behlmer, 'Deadly Motherhood: Infanticide and Medical Opinion in Mid-Victorian England', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 34 (1979), 403–27 (p. 403). He goes on to argue that infanticide peaked at mid-century and was even regarded as a 'national embarrassment'. W. B. Ryan's, *Infanticide: Its Law, Prevalence, Prevention and History*, published in 1862, was regarded as the last word on the subject. Ryan used melodramatic language to emphasise the extent of the problem, implying that dead children were to be found everywhere one looked: 'in the quiet of the bedroom we raise the box-lid, and the skeletons are there. In the calm evening walk we see in the distance the suspicious-looking bundle, and the mangled infant is within. By the canal side, or in the water, we find the dead child' (pp. 406, 404).

26 Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', pp. 10–11.

27 E. Ross, 'Labour and Love: Rediscovering London's Working-Class Mothers. 1870–1918', in Lewis, *Labour and Love*, p. 82. See also C. Dyhouse, 'Working-Class Mothers and Infant Mortality in England, 1895–1914', *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1978), 248–67.

28 Smart, 'Disruptive bodies and unruly sex', p. 18.

29 P. Knight, 'Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), 57–69 (p. 57). Legislation on abortion suggests that women were increasingly being held accountable for this as the century progressed. The 1861 Offences against the Person Act made the pregnant woman herself liable to prosecution rather than just the abortionist as laid down by the 1803 Act which first made the practice illegal. See also Smart, 'Disruptive Bodies and Unruly Sex', pp. 11–13.

30 'Indecent Advertisements and Pamphlets', *British Medical Journal*, 9 March 1895, p. 547.

31 'The Sale of Abortifacients', *British Medical Journal*, 2 December 1899, p. 1583. The reporter went on to comment, 'The advertisements, speciously worded, appeared to hold out to women an easy means of escape from the consequences of an act of indiscretion. "What else," said the Attorney General, "could have induced women in the humbler classes of life to spend 16s., 20s., and in one case as much as £2, upon medicine, when for the paltry sum of half a crown immediate relief could have been obtained, had there been nothing to conceal, from the nearest medical practitioner?"'

32 Knight, 'Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England', p. 57.

33 Brookes, 'Women and Reproduction', p. 162. Other factors which influenced women in their decisions to abort included income, health and housing problems. See also B. Harrison, 'Women and Health' in J. Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850–1945, an introduction* (London, 1995), p. 173, for her discussion of working-class women's control over their fertility.

34 Knight, 'Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England', p. 67. See also A. McLaren, 'Women's Work and Regulation of Family Size: The Question of Abortion in the Nineteenth Century', *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), 70–81 (p. 72), for his discussion of the ways in which knowledge of abortion techniques was passed on in factory districts.

35 Bland suggest that few feminists in this period, with the notable exception of Stella Browne, argued for abortion as a woman's fundamental right. She does however claim that it was 'widely resorted to by women of all classes' and was the main form of female birth control. See pp. 248, 190.

36 A. R. Higginbotham, 'Sin of the Age: Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1989), 319–37 (p. 321).

37 Many of the infanticide reports I have looked at contain only a few lines with no moral commentary, as the taboo issue of female violence is avoided. See for

example 'Shocking Murder at Willesden', *The Times*, 16 July 1897, p. 12 and 'Murder and Suicide', *The Times*, 17 June 1897, p. 12, in which the reporting does not extend beyond the discovery of the bodies into speculation about motive. Both of the women were married and were discovered by their husbands, negating the links between illegitimacy and infanticide.

38 Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 155. This is taken from a report in the *Star*.

39 Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 152.

40 L. Rose, *The Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain, 1800–1939* (London, 1986), pp. 15, 19. In this context illegitimate children are seen as 'less of a social stigma than an economic liability' (p. 21).

41 'Murders and Suicide', *The Times*, 20 February 1893, p. 10.

42 Higginbotham, 'Sin of the Age', p. 336. She focuses on the case of Ellen Wallis who tried to kill herself and her illegitimate children and argues that she acted 'out of the crippling emotional stress, anger, and fears that any deserted wife might feel' (p. 334).

43 Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', p. 11.

44 Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 153. Both she and Higginbotham argue that state officials were more likely to deal with the issue of infant death than trying to solve the problem of illegitimacy or to provide for the single mother. See also Higginbotham, 'Sin of the Age', p. 337.

45 Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 174. In 1896 Amelia Dyer was hanged for strangling babies and throwing them into the Thames; at least seventeen children who had been in her care could not be found alive. Ada Chard Williams was also executed for baby-farming in 1900.

46 See Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, pp. 15–21. He locates the cause of these crimes in the occupation of these women, many of whom were not ready to abandon their reasonably well-paid jobs to care for children. Over a quarter of all female workers were employed as servants and thus had control over their income.

47 See Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State', p. 283, for her discussion of the condemnation of working-class women and the medical view that they were 'not capable of being responsible for the welfare of infant life, either before, after or during birth'.

48 Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State', p. 275.

49 Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State', p. 271.

50 'The Prevention of Baby-Farming', *Lancet*, 21 March 1891, p. 680.

51 Attempts to criminalise seduction in order to highlight men's responsibility for the problems of unmarried motherhood repeatedly failed at this time. In 1892 the last attempt at a Seduction Bill failed to get beyond a first reading. See Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, pp. 116–17.

52 'A Heavy Sentence for Baby-Farming', *Lancet*, 2 April 1892, p. 761.

53 Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State', pp. 298, 296.

54 G. Moore, *Esther Waters*, ed. David Skilton (1894; Oxford, 1983). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

55 See Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, pp. 32–33.

56 *Athenaeum*, 28 April 1894, p. 537. It was however criticised for Moore's depiction of working-class characters, as it was suggested that they were stereotypes: 'Mr. Moore set himself to study betting men and domestic servants in order to write a book about them; he does not care about such people at all, and has only a student's interest in them'.

57 'English Literature in 1894', *Athenaeum*, 5 January 1895, p. 9. The reviewer also claimed that the novel was 'the most widely discussed and in some ways the most interesting book of the year'.

58 Matus, *Unstable bodies*, p. 160. She also cites the interesting observation by William Acton in an article on 'Unmarried wet-nurses' in the *Lancet* of 1859 that 'healthy, strong and penitent servants' were likely to have purer milk than 'sickly', 'fashionable' mothers, a view that was ridiculed by those intent on proving the impurity of the unmarried mother.

59 Richard Allen Cave, *A Study of the Novels of George Moore* (Bucks, 1978), p. 75. He argues that 'Many working-class girls gain a lucrative income from a life spent alternately as a prostitute and wetnurse; their own children cost merely the nominal charge of farming them out to a child-murderer ... This is a social fact and a genuine instance of the rich being fed with the life-blood of the poor.'

60 See Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, pp. 158–59, for her reading of Esther's story. She argues that 'being fictional, she has qualities and resources not found in ordinary people, as well as a substantial amount of good luck'.

61 Miller, *Rebel Women*, p. 27. She argues that Egerton depicts maternity as 'an embodiment of women's sexuality and creativity and potency'.

62 Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, p. 115.

63 L. Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London, 1992), p. 174.

64 S. Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester, 1997), p. 190.

65 'English Literature in 1893', *Athenaeum*, 6 January 1894, p. 17. In this review, Egerton's *Keynotes* was bracketed with Sarah Grand's controversial study of syphilis, *The Heavenly Twins*, as a disturbing sign of the times. It was criticised on the grounds of the 'hysterical frankness of its amatory abandonment' (p. 18).

66 *Athenaeum*, 23 March 1895, p. 375.

67 Infant suffocation in bed was supposedly on the rise at the turn of the century. Statistics indicated that such deaths occurred most frequently after Saturday night drinking sprees, prompting the NSPCC to denounce the evils of working-class alcoholism. See Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, pp. 176–78.

68 'Murder and Attempted Suicide', *The Times*, 5 July 1888, p. 11. The mother is discovered in an engine-house after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, moaning about her dead child.

69 Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 191.

70 Pykett provides an alternative reading of this passage in terms of Egerton's analysis of woman's nature, suggesting that Egerton spiritualises maternity and that maternal feeling may provide a key to the enigma of woman. See *The Improper Feminine*, pp. 167–68.

71 Brookes, 'Women and Reproduction', p. 163.

72 Unwanted children were frequently classified as 'still-born', and thus excluded from the births and deaths registers. They could then be buried swiftly and forgotten. The *Lancet* saw such actions as a 'grave public scandal'. See 'Burial of So-called Still-born Children', *Lancet*, 21 March 1891, p. 675.

73 See 'Murder and Mutilation in Leeds', *The Times*, 11 June 1891, p. 9. Police officers discover 'a bundle, apparently of rags, wrapped up in a grey plaid shawl. On turning it over they were horrified to find that it was the dead body of a child.'

74 Higginbotham argues that the Victorians found it easier to cope with the question of crime than the conditions of unmarried mothers, as 'infant deaths were more readily tolerated than easy virtue'. See 'Sin of the Age', p. 337.

75 Arnot, 'Infant Death, Child Care and the State', p. 284.

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