



Wordsworth's prescient baby: Conceptions of the mother-infant relationship in the development of the Self 1790s-1890s

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Abstract

This article explores views of the mother-infant relationship and how it reveals conceptions of the self in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. William Wordsworth's theory of the development of the self and mind in infancy in his 1799 Prelude (published 1850) is very much ahead of its time, anticipating twentieth century psychoanalytic and attachment relations theories. Through a thorough investigation of baby diaries and childcare advice literature during the two centuries, my findings indicate that it was only until the 1830s that two other writers' ideas about infancy and the self began to resemble Wordsworth's. I have identified three general trends in thinking during my period of investigation: before the 1830s, maternal attention was generally considered to be important to the development of the infant, but her importance did not go far beyond ensuring the physical well-being of her offspring. By the 1830s, advances in science as well as increasing evangelisation demanded the mother play a greater role in the spiritual and moral development of her children. By the 1870s, with Darwin's theory of evolution and the formalised scientific study of infancy, understandings of the development of the infant focused on the biological and evolutionary rather than the internal and subjective.

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