

THE BYSTANDER —★—

Why is The Stork Dressed Like a Man?

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I once asked a pediatrician, who was also a mother, why so many childcare books were written by men instead of women. She laughed and said, “mothers are too busy to write a book about taking care of children.”

Until the last few decades, women were essentially servants to their families, unpaid for the work they performed. But when cooking, cleaning, parenting, birthing and feeding babies could be a profitable business venture, professionals (usually men) dominated those fields.

In the movie “Dumbo,” the stork bringing him to his mother wears a blue bell-boy uniform, and birth announcements often still use the same bird (which ironically resembles an albatross) wearing a visored cap and necktie. I’d like to know; why is the stork dressed like a man?

In 1970, only 7% of obstetricians were women. Midwives attended most births at home until the 1930s when it became a hospital procedure done under anesthesia. That also made it easier and more profitable for doctors, who likely delivered many babies in one day. And experts in childcare were male pediatricians, the most famous being Dr. Benjamin Spock. Parents of the 1950s followed his recommendations--- until he became an anti-war activist during the Vietnam Era.

Married women were “housewives,” as if they were wedded to the home *and* the man. The cleaning products they bought made it seem like they’d be working alongside a dreamboat; Mr. Clean, Ajax, Chore Boy, Lifebouy, Mr. Muscle, Mr. Sheen, and Scrub Daddy still make millions. Until Julia Child, the word “chef” was a masculine noun. In the kitchen, women simply “cooked.” When prepared food became the staple, companies branded their products as Uncle Ben, Chef Boyardee and Duncan Hines. Betty Crocker and Sara Lee were just deserts.

Home making? Why couldn’t it be called “home building?” If mothers had designed kitchens, there would be an edge on all cooking ranges, so that a pot of hot food could not be tipped over by a curious toddler reaching up to grab the handle. And why are there tilting steering wheels and adjustable recliners to provide comfort in cars and living room chairs, but not adjustable heights for sinks, countertops and faucets so women of all sizes can be comfortable preparing meals?

But the most nefarious example of monetizing what women have done “for free” is the business of nourishing newborns.

Baby food became profitable when infant formula was manufactured in glass bottles and powdered form in the early 1900s, and quickly became the “modern” way to feed an infant. Most mothers in the mid-century opted for a post-partum injection that would prevent lactation, and were sent home with free supplies of formula. However, the trend in the U.S. and Europe is for “natural” feeding, driving down the estimated annual \$70 billion profits for manufacturers who now look for markets in developing countries for their products.

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At the 2018 United Nations' 71st World Health Assembly conference in Geneva, a resolution was introduced by Ecuador stating that "mother's milk is healthiest for children, and countries should strive to limit the inaccurate or misleading marketing of breast milk substitutes." It was expected to be quickly adopted but instead was adamantly opposed by delegates from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who unofficially threatened to cut Ecuador's foreign aid if the resolution was not modified. After two days of negotiations, Russia introduced a nearly identical resolution. It then passed with no opposition from the U.S.

Then the President, calling it Fake News, Tweeted, "the U.S. strongly supports breast feeding but we don't believe women should be denied access to formula. Many women need this option because of malnutrition and poverty." Aside from the fact that two words I hoped I'd never put together in one sentence are "Trump" and "breastfeeding," I can find no explanation on how this resolution would have denied access to a product manufactured by Abbott Labs, an American corporation that received an enormous tax reduction from the 2017 tax bill.

What we do know is that when formula is used where refrigeration and clean water are not readily available, it exposes infants to bacteria and water-borne diseases, causing fluid-wasting diarrhea that can quickly be fatal to babies. And it can hardly be an option for the impoverished, when it costs \$1,734 American Dollars, per year, per baby to substitute formula for "free" breastmilk. Oops, did I say, "free?" Sorry for that, because it's actually "work." It can also be a painful, inconvenient mess, creating a disproportionate dependence on the one person who needs a nap and a good cry more than the baby does.

I still don't understand why the stork delivering the baby would be dressed like a man, unless there was money to be made from it. But even more, I'd like to know why our government would want mothers to buy a product that could be a disadvantage to them and their children.

Perhaps there was money to be made from that, too.