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## Rowlandson's Death in the Nursery

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"At a Christening at Beddington Surrey," said the **Gentleman's Magazine** of Sunday 4 December 1748, "the nurse was so intoxicated, that after she had undress'd the child, instead of laying it in the cradle, she put it behind a large fire, which burnt it to death in a few minutes.-She was examined before a Magistrate, and said she was quite stupid and senseless, so that she took the child for a log of wood; on which she was discharged."



Thomas Rowlandson depicts a drunken nurse in charge of a young baby in a scene entitled *Death in the Nursery*. A skeleton representing death tenderly regards his small victim as he rocks the cradle. The nurse in charge sleeps with an overturned glass in her hand. An appended verse reads:

Drown'd in ebriated sleep  
 No vigils can the Drunkard keep.  
 - Death rocks the Cradle, as you see.  
 And sings his mortal Lullaby.  
 No shrieks, no cries will now its slumbers break;  
 The infant sleep, - ah, never to awake!

Rowlandson produced a series of prints between 1815 and 1816 under the generic title of "Dances of Death." Ackermann published these with verses by William Combe. Rowlandson and Combe never met (Combe was in prison at the time), but their collaboration through Ackermann was a success. Rowlandson's drawings were typically robust, often overflowing the canvas in untidy profusion to indicate the chaos taking place within its compass. He depicted aspects of life from birth to death and was no respecter of any aspect of it or of any of its participants. Nurses, as in this print, received their share of his barbed attentions.

Earlier, Rowlandson had drawn a midwife going to confinement, complete with pattens on her feet and with lantern and spirit bottle, and this image was used by Dickens to represent "Sairey Gamp" in **The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit** (1843-4). It was alleged that this good woman would attend a "laying-out" and a "lying-in" with equal zest and relish. Dickens described how "the face of Mrs Gamp-the nose in particular-was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits." Fortunately, this image improved as midwives and nurses received more training, but other problems arose with the advent of the man-midwife or

accoucheur.

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