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Rachel S. Holtzberg April 11, 2011

Roman Women and Reproductive Autonomy:
An exploration of the intersection between social forces, medical practice, and law from the late Republic to the early Empire

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Abstract

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Women are often subject to the forces of patriarchy. In societies such as ancient Rome, where patriarchy was as deeply intertwined with daily life as the belief in the supernatural, this sexism manifested itself in innumerable overt and covert ways. Roman medicine and female healthcare is a surprisingly overlooked yet strikingly significant example of patriarchy in the guise of theory, intellect, and learned practice. Through analyzing the way in which women were treated (in all senses of the word) according to these theories, we can construct a more comprehensive picture of the daily life of an elite Roman woman, and continue our quest to accurately assess the myriad facets that comprised the world of the Romans. In the following paper I explore the roles that social and legal convention, medical theory and practice, and Augustus' marriage legislation contributed to the limited autonomy afforded to women over their sexuality and reproductivity.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The inspiration for this paper blossomed as I perused scholarly works on ancient Greek and Roman medicine. The numerous books and articles and the primary sources in which they were rooted were fascinating to read, not least due to the creative and bizarre medical and anatomical theories, descriptions, drugs, and therapies which the ancients dreamed up and utilized. Yet what struck me most was the underlying sexism which pervaded every male-authored medical text pertaining to women. Texts on male physiology can be read rather straightforwardly, while texts describing women employ social gender prejudices, directly or indirectly, to elucidate theories and treatment of women. Since Greco-Roman medicine was male-focused medicine, as I shall demonstrate, women were only written of when their medical issues were distinctly female. Thus medical writings about women focus on reproduction and reproductive health, and are layered with social prejudices from a strictly male perspective. Furthermore, the writings collectively convey a strong message that a woman's reproductive choice was second to the needs of the male. While women from the birth of Roman society onwards relied on the network and support of their female peers, male agency ultimately trumped female agency in this inherently female domain.

What I discovered before me was a unique pathway of considering the status of ancient women – that is, from a medical perspective. Textual evidence from 2000 years ago is chock full of source material exploring medical theory, including sections and whole treatises on gynecology and obstetrics. My most readily available primary sources spanned from the beginnings of recorded medical theory in fifth-century B.C.E. Greece all the way to the Roman Empire in the third century C.E. In order to craft a

succinct line of reasoning, I first narrowed down my population to consider the lives of Roman women, and further narrowed my research on the lives of elite Roman women, about whom we have the most information in ancient sources; the lives of lower-class Roman women are rarely mentioned in these sources and our understanding of their communities is consequently limited. Second, I chose to focus on the time period when Greek medicine encroached on Roman society, a trend that started in the middle of the Republic and became ubiquitous by the early Empire. This was an ideal time frame within which to explore the status of women because it provided me with the opportunity to consider the various tensions experienced by Roman women as they tried to navigate their way through life. My research thus focused on analyzing the tensions caused by deeply-rooted legal and social norms, medical biases, and new legislation for a new empire dealing specifically with reproduction.

At present, the only available secondary text dealing specifically with medicine and Roman women is Rebecca Flemming's *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (2001). This was a useful place to start, but as the title suggests the scope of the book lies primarily in the second century C.E., towards the very end of my chosen time frame. The role of women in ancient medicine is yet an under-analyzed realm of the classics – in fact, female agency in any non-legal setting is not often written on in primary or secondary scholarship – perhaps because our only sources were written by men. We do not possess a single piece of (surviving) primary source material on medicine from a Greek or Roman woman's perspective. That in itself provides valuable information on the status of women working in the medical field, especially in light of the fact that the Greek doctor Soranus,

at least, assumes that midwives could read and understand medical treatises. This apparent lack also benefits my argument, for the very nature of my assertion lies in the lives that men created for women. We know that Roman women were legally and socially subjected to passive, submissive lives filled with conflicting ideals and expectations all created by men. It is both fitting and revealing to use only male sources, all of which show the male mentality that inevitably influenced society values and mores and the way that women were treated and valued in ancient Rome.

I am thankful to have had at my disposal wonderful translations of many relevant primary texts. I am especially grateful for Owsei Temkin's strikingly clear and enjoyable translation of Soranus' *Gynecology*, our foremost existing text on ancient gynecological practice, without which this paper would have struggled to come together.

Women are often subject to the forces of patriarchy. In societies such as ancient Rome, where patriarchy was as deeply intertwined with daily life as the belief in the supernatural, this sexism manifested itself in innumerable overt and covert ways. Medicine and female healthcare is a surprisingly overlooked yet strikingly significant example of patriarchy in the guise of theory, intellect, and learned practice. Through analyzing the way in which women were treated (in all senses of the word) according to these theories, we can construct a more comprehensive picture of the daily life of an elite Roman woman, and continue our quest to accurately assess the myriad facets that comprised the world of the Romans. In the following chapters we will explore the roles that social and legal convention, medical theory and practice, and Augustus' marriage legislation contributed to the limited freedoms afforded to women over their sexuality and reproductivity.

Chapter II: Elite Roman women in society and law

The social and legal status of Roman women at the end of the Republic was comprised of a complex web of opposing ideals, legislation, and personal adherence. To comprehend the delicate line on which an elite Roman woman balanced herself and was judged, let us begin by recognizing the benefits afforded her by society. An upper-class woman was privileged with the authority to manage her *villa*, supervise her slaves, and oversee her children's education. With slaves responsible for performing household chores, she possessed the opportunity to enhance her personal reputation with intellectual and artistic achievements.[1] Certain wealthy aristocratic women whose spouses and relatives were involved with politics, such as Cornelia *mater Gracchorum* (mother of the infamous politicians Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus of the mid-second century B.C.E.), used their education and influence to insert themselves within the political realm.[2] In fact, away from the public eye, a wife would probably have been involved in her husband's business, the management of his estates, and his political career. "She was expected, for instance, to maintain his political connections and inform him of the situation in Rome during his absences abroad for military duties, governorship of a province, or in the turmoils of civil war."[3]

These activities certainly paint a rosy picture of the life of the socially elite woman, yet Pomeroy is quick to remind us that societal expectations of the Roman woman were far from simple:

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[1] Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 169-171.
[2] *Ibid*., 150.
[3] Emily A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

> The Roman matron of the late Republic must be viewed against the background of shrewd and politically powerful Hellenistic princesses, expanding cultural opportunities for women, the search for sexual fulfillment in the context of declining birthrate, and the individual assertiveness characteristic of the Hellenistic period. The rest of the picture is Roman: enormous wealth, aristocratic indulgence and display, pragmatism permitting women to exercise leadership during absence of men on military and governmental missions of long duration; and, as a final element, a past preceding the influence of the Greeks – a heritage so idealized by the Romans that historical events were scarcely distinguishable from legends, and the legends of the founding of Rome and the early Republic were employed in the late Republic and early Empire for moral instruction and propaganda. The result was that wealthy aristocratic women who played high politics and presided over literary salons were nevertheless expected to be able to spin and weave as though they were living in the days when Rome was young. These social myths set up a tension between the ideal and the real Roman matron.[4]

Indeed, the qualities of the ideal and real Roman woman were incongruous. Attempting to find her niche between exerting public influence during her husband's absence while keeping a low public profile upon his return, overseeing the management of the villa while spending time and manual effort honing her domestic skills, a woman could hardly have achieved perfect equilibrium within her position. The ideal of womanhood was in essence an unattainable feat, one for which these women were nevertheless pressured to strive. Lest one deduce that lower-class women were free from such pressures, since they did not have the means to own and oversee slaves nor were they active in politics, let us turn to additional conflicting messages of ideal womanhood in the Roman republic which affected all women.

The very words used to refer to a woman in ancient Rome convey much about her expected behavior. An upper-class *matrona* was so-called in homage to her childbearing potential. The word *matrona* derives from the Latin *mater*, mother,

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[4] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 149.

indicating a social status determined by one's ability to bear children. Since a child was only legally acknowledged when born in a recognized marriage, one's identity as a *matrona* simultaneously identified her as a wife. For the most part, during the Republic, any respectable, upper-class married woman was called a *matrona* by those both within and outside of her household.[5]

Similarly, an etymological study of the word *uxor*, wife, reveals its relation to the Sanskrit word meaning 'sprinkle with seed.'[6] Not surprisingly, the primary purpose of marriage was to produce children, an understanding frequently attested to in ancient sources. Rawson submits, "the phrase '*liberorum quaerendum gratia*' ('for the purpose of producing children') recurs often enough, with minor variations, to suggest it was a legal or ritual formula."[7] In fact, "it was part of the censor's job to inquire of each man who presented himself at the census whether he was married….The question took the form 'Have you a wife for the purpose of breeding children?'"[8] Plutarch, writing on the life of the statesman Camillus of the fifth century B.C.E., records:

> There is on record a noble achievement of his censorship, that of bringing the unmarried men, partly by persuasion and partly by threatening them with fines, to join in wedlock with the women who were living in widowhood, and these were many because of the wars.[9]

The Tiberian historian Valerius Maximus also recorded an anecdote on Camillus, with a clearer emphasis on his agenda:

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[5] Hemelrijk, *Matrona*, 14-15.

[6] Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: iusti coniuges from the time of Cicero to the time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 6.

[7] Beryl Rawson, "The Roman Family," *The Family in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986), 9.

[8] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 58.

[9] Plutarch, *Camillus* 2 from *Lives II: Themistocles and Camillus, Aristides and Cato Major, Cimon and Lucullus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

> Censors Camillus and Postumius ordered persons who had reached old age as bachelors to pay copper coins to the treasury as penalty. They deserved a second punishment for daring to protest against such an ordinance in the face of a rebuke such as this: "Nature writes a law for us; as we are born, so must we beget. By raising you your parents bound you in decency with a debt to bring up grandchildren. Add that by the gift of Fortune you obtained a long adjournment of this obligation, during which time your years were squandered, void of the names of husband and father. Go then and loosen the knotty mite for the use of a numerous prosperity.[10]

Here we find an example of a censor actively encouraging marriage with the use of a penalty in order to increase the birthrate, presumably to replenish the many lives lost to recent warfare.

Many centuries later we find the same relationship between marriage and children. A statement by Emperor Probus (276-282 C.E.) to a petitioner Fortunatus reads:

> If your neighbors or others knew that you had in your home a wife in order to sire children (*liberorum procreandum causa*) and (also) that a daughter from this marriage was accepted (by you as legitimate offspring], then although no documents were drawn up relating to the marriage or the daughter's birth, nonetheless the truth of the marriage and of the accepted daughter has force on its own.[11]

We learn from this document that production of progeny was used, in conjunction with public opinion and the father's earlier acceptance of the child as legitimate, as solid proof of a marriage that had not been officially legalized. Given the unchanged approach to marriage over the six-hundred-year span between Camillus and Probus, we might deduce that Probus' rationalization would have been equally valid in the centuries between them. Another century and a half later, co-Emperors Theodosius and Valentinian II were presented with a case of a couple between whom there had been no

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[10] Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Sayings and Doings* 2.9.1, trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[11] Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A.J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 47.

marriage settlement and no marriage ceremony. Since the partners in question were of equal social status and therefore had *conubium* (legal capacity to marry[12]), *and* they had produced children, the marriage was deemed legitimate "because it is confirmed by their agreement (*consensu*) and the belief (*fide*) of their friends."[13] Thus we begin to understand the inextricable link between marriage and procreation that dominated social values from the very early Republic into the late Empire.

That marriage centered on producing progeny is further illustrated by the actions of Sulla, prominent general and statesman of the first century B.C.E., who divorced his third wife, Cloelia, on the grounds of infertility:

> And this was not the only woman whom he married, but first, when he was still a stripling, he took Ilia to wife, and she bore him a daughter; then Aelia after her; and thirdly, Cloelia, whom he divorced for barrenness, honourably, and with words of praise, to which he added gifts.[14]

Rawson notes that while it was an "honorable discharge" for Cloelia, on whom Sulla bestowed praises and gifts, Sulla received no criticism for his actions.[15] Plutarch's language is intriguing, since he implies that Cloelia was morally virtuous, but lacked marital virtue. While not every infertile couple necessarily permitted this to split up their union, divorces recorded were often attributed to sterility; specifically, the wife was culpable for a barren marriage.[16]

Finally, let us not forget a strikingly blunt statement by Soranus, one of Rome's most influential physicians of the first and second centuries C.E., who declares,

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[12] Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 31.
[13] Frier and McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law*, 47.
[14] Plutarch, *Sulla* 6 from *Lives IV: Alcibiades and Coriolanus, Lysander and Sulla,* trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).
[15] Rawson, "The Roman Family," 9.
[16] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 158.

"…women usually are married for the sake of children and succession, and not for mere enjoyment."[17]

Thus on numerous grounds we come to understand the value of female fertility and its role in producing legitimate Roman offspring. That offspring were legitimate was crucial since only legitimate children could inherit as heirs and pass on property. Given the pattern of burdening married women with the responsibility to produce children, (which incidentally led to ascribing infertility to a woman's deficiency), a double standard existed on the issue of sexual freedom. Roman men were free to consort with prostitutes, slaves, and virtually any non-upper-class woman, yet extramarital relations of any flavor were strictly forbidden to Roman women.[18] We can better understand this inequity by using evidence from sexual relations within Greek society; for in many respects, the Greek attitude towards sexuality was similar to the Roman attitude towards sexuality and many other aspects of life. As Kapparis for example argues, restriction of sexual activity among Greek women was crucial

> …for the husband, so that he could be sure than any offspring were his, for the family, so that they could be sure about the legitimacy of the offspring who would inherit the *oikos* [household] and continue the family line, and for the state, so that it could be sure that children presented as citizens were truly of citizen stock."[19]

This analysis transfers beautifully to the Roman value system.

Given the highly patriarchal organization of the Roman family unit, and the understanding that ownership passed through male descendents, it was crucial that a man be able to identify his own children over whom he wielded total authority and to

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[17] Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.9.34, trans. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956).

[18] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 160.

[19] Konstantinos Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World* (London: Duckworth, 2002), 98.

whom he passed his property and inheritance.[20] We understand the importance of this situation of inheritance from a statement by Cicero, philosopher, lawyer, statesman, and rhetorician (106 B.C.E. – 43 B.C.E.), who, in an oration, touched on the seriousness of female-contrived abortion.

> I recollect that a certain Milesian woman, when I was in Asia, because she had by medicines brought on abortion, having been bribed to do so by the heirs in reversion, was convicted of a capital crime; and rightly, inasmuch as she had destroyed the hope of the father, the memory of his name, the supply of his race, the heir of his family, a citizen intended for the use of the republic.[21]

The gravity of her conviction, justified by the listed offenses to which her selfish act had led, can only be interpreted as blatant patriarchy, omnipresent across the Roman value system. Furthermore, citizenship of Rome was a privilege into which one was most easily born. One of the fundamental certainties of the incredibly complex social stratification of Rome's inhabitants was the distinction between citizens and foreigners. While a citizen and non-citizen strolling side by side down the *Via Appia* may have been indistinguishable, the citizen possessed a societal and legal value far surpassing that of his companion. It was a constant effort among Romans, and a special mission of the emperors, to continuously build up and strengthen the citizen stock.[22] In this way, citizens policed their own legitimacy and women became their citizen breeders.

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[20] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 16.

[21] Cicero, *Pro Aulo Cluentio* 32 from *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C.D. Younge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1902).

[22] See Chapter IV for further details on state-sponsored encouragement of procreation among Roman citizens.

Yet while female fertility within the context of legitimate offspring[23] was cherished and supported among citizens, it stood in contrast to another equally fundamental keystone of Roman culture – one that also centered on female sexuality.[24] The six Vestal Virgins, guardians of the sacred hearth from which the cult of Vesta was presumed to have developed, were charged with keeping the flame forever burning as a symbol of the "continuity of both family and community."[25] Their identities as virgins were crucial to their status; "since a virgin belongs to no man, she can incarnate the collective, the city: she can belong to everyone."[26] As the Vestals' work was of a religious nature, deviations from proper protocol were grievous; were a Vestal tried and judged guilty of losing her virginity, she would be buried alive. In this context, virginity is highly sacred and more treasured than fertility. Nevertheless, once a Vestal's thirty-year period of service ended, she was presented with a dowry and free to marry, although most did not. The Vestal Virgins were also involved in various public roles politically, economically,[27] and perhaps surprisingly, in agricultural and fertility rites. It is clear, then, that virginity is not equated to sterility, nor incompatible with fertility. In fact, Pomeroy suggests that "purity and intactness can be viewed as stored-up fertility."[28] However we analyze this discrepancy, the tension between two polar ideals remains. Fertility was crucial to the physical continuation of the Roman people, while virginity was important for the divine continuation of the Roman race. Most important is the

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[23] See Christine Hayes' "Genealogy, Illegitimacy, and Personal Status: The Yerushalmi in Comparative Perspective," (p.84-86) in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* for further details on the criteria for legitimate offspring.

[24] Rawson, "The Roman Family," 25.

[25] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 210.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Rawson, "The Roman Family," 25.

[28] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 211.

recognition that a woman was valued for her sexual status, whether actively procreating or sacredly abstaining.

This clash between virginity and fertility surfaces elsewhere in the more pragmatic realm of feminine health, noted by Soranus. In his book, *Gynecology*, he devotes many paragraphs to the exploration of "whether permanent virginity is healthful." Those medical and intellectual authors who support permanent virginity argue "that the body is made ill by desire….Furthermore, all excretion of seed is harmful in females as in males. Virginity, therefore, is healthful, since it prevents the excretion of seed."[29] Medical opponents of permanent virginity argue against the aforementioned claims and add that "many people after intercourse have been more agile and have carried themselves more nobly," in addition to the observation that intercourse relaxes the whole body including the uterus, keeping menstruation unhindered.[30] Having presented both sides, Soranus interjects his final conclusion, advocating for the healthfulness of permanent virginity and the harmfulness of sexual intercourse, not least because sex leads to pregnancy and childbirth which are often harmful for a woman's health. Soranus' opinion here was most likely a theoretical diversion from his practical guide to women's reproductive health;[31] in fact, he next discusses up to what time

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[29] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.7.30.

[30] *Ibid.*, 1.31.

[31] "The *Gynecology* itself offers three reasons for not taking Soranus' passage on lifelong virginity as the reflection of actual social practice. The first is that the only women Soranus can offer as proof that virginity is more healthy are women associated with service to the gods. He mentions virgins, who have never experienced intercourse, and celibate women, who abstain from intercourse….Two other factors suggest that Soranus included his endorsement of lifelong virginity in the *Gynecology* more for the sake of the theoretical controversy he was engaged in than as a practical prescriptive for his female Roman patients. First, Soranus concludes chapter 32 with a grudging concession that, although lifelong virginity is more healthy, intercourse in necessary for the continuity of the species, the topic which he says he must discuss next. Second, the titles of the next three chapters – "Up to What Time Should Females Be Kept Virgins?", "How to Recognize Those Capable of Conception," and "What is the Best Time for Fruitful

females should be kept virgins and the ideal time for fruitful intercourse. It is relevant to point out that his advice completely counters the polarity of classic Hippocratic gynecology postulated nearly six centuries pre-Soranus. According to Hippocratic gynecology, "this polarity equated women's health with intercourse and childbearing, on the one hand, and women's illnesses with virginity and celibacy, on the other."[32] That Soranus recapitulated this debate at length, ultimately differing in opinion from the Hippocratics, shows that the status of female sexuality remained a very live issue, subject to philosophical developments and medical arguments. The maturation from virginity to sexuality was essential to female identity and how doctors approached their female patients. Here again surface dueling values with regards to reproduction.

These baby-breeding *matronae* faced yet another conflicting principle, one that was strictly Roman, having no Greek counterpart.[33] For while *matronae* were praised for procreation and motherhood, they were simultaneously expected to marry only once, remaining faithful to their deceased husbands.[34] Such women were termed *univirae*, literally "of one man," a title acknowledging their sole husbands. The archeological record has preserved numerous tomb epitaphs praising those women who died married only once, although Pomeroy is quick to point out that some of the women earned this praise perhaps unfoundedly, having died young.[35] Whether or not a widow

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Intercourse?" – suggest that Soranus' chapters on lifelong virginity are a theoretical excursus from the goals of his book on gynecology. These goals are the successful management of pregnancy and the correction of women's diseases and dysfunctions for the production of healthy children." Jody Rubin Pinault, "The Medical Case for Virginity in the Early Second Century C.E.: Soranus of Ephesus, Gynecology 1.32," *Helios* 19, no. 1 and 2 (1992), 130-131.

[32] Pinault, "The Medical Case for Virginity," 129.

[33] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 161.

[34] Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta,* 14.

[35] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 161.

adhered to this custom in practice, it is clear that Roman women faced many simultaneous conflicting social responsibilities, all of which were related to their ability to reproduce, or lack thereof.

Such conflicting responsibilities may have been manageable were Roman women directors of their own lives. Yet underlying Roman legal theory was the tenet that the female sex was weak in body and mind, and must be under the legal custody of males from birth till death. In fact, only the Vestal Virgins received automatic legal exemption from male custody,[36] perhaps because they had proven themselves responsible and capable women by remaining celibate and successfully protecting the sacred flame, and therefore the destiny of Rome, from extinguishment. We have thus far concluded that women were defined by their reproductive status and by the functioning of their bodies. The irony is that, due to Roman legal and social mandates, the woman actually retained little control over her own body.

Upon birth, a Roman girl fell immediately under the custody of the *paterfamilias* of her family. As the name implies, the *paterfamilias* was the father and leader of the entire household. He may have been the biological father or the "oldest male ascendant in a direct male line,"[37] such as a grandfather or an uncle who lived on the same property. One may, in fact, state that the *paterfamilias* was the owner of his entire household, since those under his power possessed no property of their own, as everything they acquired belonged to him by default. His children, too, belonged to him like property and he wielded the power to decide whether or not they were worth

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[36] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 151.
[37] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 16.

rearing upon birth,[38] to sell them, hand them off in marriage without their agreement,[39] or transfer them to another family and the power of a new *paterfamilias,* as in the case of adoption or a marriage which committed his daughter to the *manus*, hand, of her husband.[40] The laws of custody reveal that the authority of the *paterfamilias* inherently surpassed those of the husband; it was the decision of the *paterfamilias* to permit a daughter to the legal guardianship of her husband (or any other man), not the law of marriage itself.[41]

With the permission of her *paterfamilias*, "a wife could become subject to a husband's *manus* in three ways: either by the two formal marriage ceremonies known as *confarreatio* (sharing of spelt – a coarse grain), and *coemptio* (pretended sale), or by *usus* (continuous cohabitation for a year)."[42] Upon legally entering her husband's house, a wife attained the same legal status as that of his daughter. Thus, a wife *in manu*, would share in her intestate husband's estate equally with her children, and would give up all acquired property to his possession.[43]

Should a woman be free from the power of a father or the control of a husband, she nevertheless remained in the custody of a *tutor*, guardian,[44] whose duties consisted of asserting his *auctoritas*, authority, by giving or withholding consent for certain of her actions.[45] Such a situation might occur if a *paterfamilias* emancipated his daughter, who was married without the formal *manus* stipulation. Marriage without *manus* became

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[38] Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 91.
[39] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 16.
[40] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 27.
[41] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 152.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 29.
[44] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 43.
[45] Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 18.

ubiquitous by the late Republic. Economic explanations for this phenomenon point to the increase in wealth among the Romans by the second century B.C.E. and clarify that since marriage with *manus* offered the wife some rights to her husband's property, the groom's family would require a marriage without manus; similarly, if the wife were wealthy, her family would have preferred a marriage without *manus* so that her property remained with her biological family.[46] Thus the *tutela* (guardianship) system became common over the traditional *paterfamilias* around the late Republic. Due to the slight leniency with which the *tutela* may have afforded a woman, some women also began to acquire property rights.[47] It is important to recognize that any privileges granted to women were offered not based on women's intrinsic value, rather on what men were willing to grant them. The Roman world was a man's world, and any form of financial autonomy for women was a right bestowed by men to women.

The traditional purpose of the *tutela* system was less focused on exerting total authority over the woman as it was to safeguard her family property. Hence a woman's *tutores* were often her intestate heirs. In classical law, the husband was able to give his wife (but not his children) the privilege of choosing her own guardian.[48] This privilege may have been quite appealing to a Roman woman, who could choose a guardian in a different household thereby securing herself a measure of freedom as her *tutor* had no immediate or formal authority over her.[49]

Yet even though more women of the late Republic may have attained a greater measure of legal freedom than ever before, one need only turn to the literary record for

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[46] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 155.
[47] Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 18.
[48] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 30.
[49] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 155.

evidence against such trends in practice. Dionysus of Halicarnassus, who wrote during the reign of Augustus, noted that the laws of Romulus, founder of Rome, "obliged both the married women as having no other refuge, to conform themselves entirely to the temper of their husbands, and the husbands to rule their wives as necessary and inseparable possessions.[50] Livy, another Augustan author, wrote, "never while their males survive is feminine slavery shaken off; and even they abhor the freedom which loss of husbands and fathers gives."[51] The last part of Livy's quote is truly an eye-opener, for we learn that the male perspective interpreted social expectations of female submission as female enjoyment of male authority. Indeed though opportunities for leniency within the law became more available to the Roman matron over time, during the Republic she was, by law, unable to achieve full autonomy, especially with regards to property and finances. For "a guardian was required when a woman performed important transactions, such as accepting an inheritance, making a testament, or assuming a contractual obligation, and all transactions requiring *mancipatio* (a ritual form of sale), including selling land and manumitting a slave."[52]

Whether under the legal or physical guardianship of a father, husband, or peripheral *tutor*, women possessed no true autonomy and were generally subservient to the authority of their male guardians, often regarding financial decisions. Closely linked to the delicate details of property and inheritance was the weighted issue of progeny, for children ensured the continuation of property within the family. As men exercised

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[50] Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities* 2.25.4, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937).
[51] Livy, *Ab Urdbe Condita: Books XXXI-XXXIV* 34. 7. 12, trans. Evan T. Sage (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).
[52] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 151.

financial control within the family, it follows that men were assumed to control sexuality and make the decisions about child-rearing within the marriage.[53] We find these assumptions played out in the medical and political spheres at the end of the Republic and early Empire, as medical theory and political legislation played to male sensibilities and biases, preventing women from wielding autonomy over their own bodies and reproductive decisions.

[53] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 95.

Chapter III: Women in Roman medicine

Introduction to Hellenized Roman medicine and the role of midwives

While it is clear that the oppressed social and legal status of women remained relatively unchanged from the Roman republic through its development into an impressively large empire, significant transformations in Roman medical attitudes and practices occurred from the end of the Republic, many of which impeded women's liberty within the private sphere. Such transformations were due to a steady, pervasive shift from folk medicine towards Hellenic medicine. Our modern term folk medicine refers to the informal medical care that is practiced without any clearly delineated guidelines by any community of people among whom there is familiarity. This community might refer to a household, a village, or a town. Few primary records of Roman folk medicine exist, although we do have extant writings of Cato the Elder (c. 234 B.C.E. – 149 B.C.E.) preserved by way of Pliny the Elder (23 – 70 C.E.), who included in his Book XXIX of *The Natural History* a letter from Cato to his son, Marcus. The letter is a vitriolic commentary on the arrival of the Greeks in Rome:

> Whenever that nation shall bestow its literature upon Rome it will mar everything; and that all the sooner, if it sends its physicians among us. They have conspired among themselves to murder all barbarians with their medicine; a profession which they exercise for lucre, in order that they may win our confidence, and dispatch us all the more easily.[54]

Lest the reader believe Cato despised all forms of medicine, Pliny subsequently reveals,

> [Cato] subjoins an account of the medical prescriptions, by the aid of which he had ensured to himself and to his wife a ripe old age; prescriptions upon which we are now about to enlarge. He asserts also that he has a book of recipes in

[54] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 29. 7, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855).

> his possession, by the aid of which he treats the maladies of his son, his servants, and his friends. [55]

By attacking the practice of Greek medicine, Cato approves of the traditional Roman way of healing, by which the paterfamilias bore responsibility for the health of his household.[56]

We also are indebted to other writings of Pliny the Elder, whose various chapters on female complaints permit a fleeting glance into female-specific medical practices and advice, understood by Pliny to be inherently Roman when not attributed to a Greek or any other specified healer.[57] As scanty as sources of general folk medicine unavoidably are, we have virtually no evidence of Roman midwives. Based on comparative evidence[58] in other societies, mainly Greek, we can plausibly construct the Roman "folk midwife" as an older woman within the society with birthing experience who was called on when needed. Folk midwifery was not a career as the later-introduced Greek midwifery had become, rather a skill set relegated to experienced women to be used when necessary. When a woman of an elite class went into labor, the women of her household – slaves included[59] – were probably called upon first, and if none had birthed

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[55] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 29. 8.

[56] Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 162.

[57] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 28.77 and 30.43-45.

[58] Look to Nancy Demand's article, "Monuments, midwives, and gynecology," in *Ancient Medicine in its Socio-Cultural Context: Papers read at the Congress held at Leiden University 13-15 April 1992* for further information.

[59] Evidence for slave participation during labor and delivery within the context of folk medicine may be deduced from an analysis of the sixteen funeral epitaphs commemorating professional midwives recorded in the *CIL* (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*). According to French, "Of those sixteen, nine either come from the *columbaria* of the great noble houses of Rome or are clearly members of the *familia Caesaris*. It seems, then, a reasonable inference that large, wealthy households had their own midwives. Only one of these midwives died a slave; the others appear to be freed women or the daughters of freed women." Nevertheless, she argues, "The *praenomina* of these women confirm a hypothesis of servile origin" (French, 72). Thus we may inference not only that slaves played some participatory role during the

a child previously, one could expect that a slave was sent to fetch the closest woman who had experience. This practical, self-generated model of care created by necessity is characteristic of folk medicine.

A more structured, professional alternative to folk medicine entered the scene with the gradual assimilation of Greek culture and customs, including Greek medical practice, into Rome. According to the Roman historians, the first doctor, the Peloponnesian Arcagathus, came to Rome in 219 B.C.E.;[60] by the middle of the first century B.C.E. "it had become *de rigeur* to employ a Greek physician."[61] Greek medical structure was largely based on the writings of the Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of texts (the majority of which were written between 420 B.C.E. – 350 B.C.E., with several dating to the third or second century B.C.E.[62]) on various practical and theoretical medical concerns which were very influential in subsequent Greek medicine. In Greek society, alongside Hippocratic medical practitioners sprung up professional midwives,[63] women who specialized in a career centering on female health and childbirth. Thus the use of trained midwives was subsequently introduced to Roman society, as well as a theoretical basis for gynecology, first recorded in the Hippocratic Corpus in texts such as "On the diseases of women" and "On the nature of the woman."

The sum total of these changes – a collection of written medical treatises, professionalization of medical practitioners, and overall Hellenization of Rome –

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birthing process, but that in fact many midwives were slaves or manumitted slaves who had earned emancipation for their services.

[60] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 29.6.

[61] Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 164.

[62] *Ibid.*, 60-61.

[63] From hereon in, the term midwife will refer to the professionalized female healthcare practitioner as introduced by Greek medicine into Hellenized Italy. When referring to midwives pre-Hellenization, they will be identified specifically as folk midwives.

resulted in an influx of Greek doctors[64] who began to exert their own influence on the Roman woman and, simultaneously, on the Roman family. For where obstetrics and gynecology had traditionally been the domain of females, attended to originally by folk midwives, and ultimately, professional midwives and female assistants, Greek doctors with their gynecological theories and therapies usurped the midwives' singular power and leadership and inserted their own male dominance and superiority within the birthing room, physically and ideologically. As we shall see further, the male presence in the birthing room and at other gynecological visits limited a woman's choice in reproductive matters; the existence of male-written texts on gynecology increased male involvement in women's care and left women to experience male pressure and patriarchal biases (on such crucial matters as progeny and property) much more directly than ever before. Given the popularity of Greek doctors, midwives inevitably decreased in value compared to their professional male counterparts.[65] Over time, traditional female-to-female care became enveloped by male domination – a reality with significant social implications.

As noted above, sources of information on Roman folk medicine are limited. Yet we can cautiously reconstruct this medical tradition based on writings by Cato the Elder (234 B.C.E. – 149 B.C.E.) and Pliny the Elder (23 – 79 C.E.) about Roman life, and from

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[64] See Chapter 11, "Rome and the Transplantation of Greek Medicine," in Nutton's *Ancient Medicine*.

[65] Consider Flemming's description of the midwife: "The identity of the *obstetrix* was shaped by childbirth, an event of considerable cultural as well as medical significance, but her sphere of action extended out from this defining moment to encompass the overall care of female health. Her inferior relationship with the generality of the physician's art, and her subordination to its representatives, is assumed and asserted in the writings of medical doctors" (38-39). Consider also Flemming's reading of Galen's works (a Greek physician of the second century C.E): "There are midwives whom he must deal with in the course of this performance, but as subordinates not equals, as attendants on someone else rather than associated with him himself" (271). Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 271.

reports by authors Celsus (first century C.E.), Soranus (first-second centuries C.E.), and Galen (129 – 199 C.E.) who comment on common practice in Rome within Greek medical culture. Pliny in particular offers a wealth of intriguing therapies to aid and cure female maladies:

> A wolf's fat, applied externally, acts emolliently upon the uterus, and the liver of a wolf is very soothing for pains in that organ. It is found advantageous for women, when near delivery, to eat wolf's flesh, or, if they are in travail, to have a person near them who has eaten it; so much so, indeed, that it will act as a countercharm even to any noxious spells which may have been laid upon them. In case, however, a person who has eaten wolf's flesh should happen to enter the room at the moment of parturition, dangerous effects will be sure to follow.[66]
>
> By administering sow's milk with honeyed wine, parturition is facilitated; and if taken by itself it will promote the secretion of the milk when deficient in nursing women.[67]
>
> The midwives assure us that she-goats' urine, taken in drink, and the dung, applied topically, will arrest uterine discharges, however much in excess.[68]

Pliny's account is quite exciting, for it is a snapshot in time of the evolution from Roman folk to Hellenized medicine. On the one hand he offers rather primitive and quasi-medically founded remedies, illustrative of Roman folk medicine and quite different from the *relatively* more practical recipes of Greek Soranus or Galen. On the other hand he invokes the term *obstetrix*, midwife, whose identity became defined as Hellenic medicine spread into Rome. With regard to Pliny's valuable insight into folk medicine, French notes:

> Regardless of the lack of attention to hygiene and sanitation and the likelihood that the medications employed did little good – except as they exercised a placebo effect and prevented dehydration – we must remember that, at the very least, the maternity care described by Pliny was very personal and

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[66] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 28.77.

[67] *Ibid*.

[68] *Ibid.*

> attentive to the mother. She was at home, not in a strange, alien environment; she was not left alone, sometimes for hours, to sweat out the initial stages of labor by herself. She had the constant company of some of her female relatives and the midwife to encourage her and to divert her mind from the pains of labor.[69]

In fact, all literary sources make it clear that this personal, focused care of a woman by women was the traditional model by which obstetric and gynecological health was practiced. We might infer that Greek midwifery care followed a similar pattern, given evidence from a Platonic dialogue. In it, Socrates declared:

> The midwives, by means of drugs and incantations, are able to arouse the pangs of labor and, if they wish, to make them milder, and to cause those to bear who have difficulty in bearing; and they cause miscarriages if they think them desirable.[70]

These tasks of the Greek midwives highly correlate to those tasks laid out for midwives in Soranus' *Gynecology*. Thus the text suggests that the role of the midwife had changed little from the Platonic/Hippocratic era (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.) to Soranus' era (first-second centuries centuries C.E.). Working in reverse, then, just as Soranus recognized the personal, focused care that contemporary midwives in Rome offered to women,[71] we may infer that classical Greek midwives offered the same such attention and personal care. With this understanding that ancient midwives across the Mediterranean exhibited similar patterns of care and scopes of practice, spanning at

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[69] French, *Midwives and Maternity Care in the Roman World*, 71.

[70] Plato, *Theaetetus* 149c-d. from *Cratulus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921).

[71] According to Soranus, the best midwife "must be respectable since people will have to trust their household and the secrets of their lives to her," implying that midwives offer personal, intimate sessions. Regarding specific medical practices he teaches, "it is proper that the face of the gravida should be visible to the midwife who shall allay her anxiety, assuring her that there is nothing to fear and that delivery will be easy." Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.3 and 2.5(70a).

least half a millennium, let us turn to a specific niche they filled within the domain of women's health.

Perhaps one of the most critical tasks of the ancient midwife, when not immediately attending to a birth, was her role as what would today be termed a family planner. That is, midwives were often called upon to prescribe contraceptives to prevent pregnancy and abortifacients to end a pregnancy. In his thorough analysis of ancient abortion techniques and preferences, Kapparis notes that in a variety of non-medical works, both Greek and Latin, oral drugs appear to be the most widespread method of care.[72] Euripides, the great Athenian tragedian of the fifth century B.C.E., includes this little exclamation within a larger monologue by Andromache:

> For of my own accord, willingly and taking no refuge at an altar, I shall stand trial to determine whether I am poisoning your daughter and making her womb infertile, as she claims.[73]

The Greek historian Plutarch, in his biography on Roman forefather Romulus, speaks of the king's legislation:

> He also enacted certain laws, and among them one of severity, which forbids a wife to leave her husband, but permits a husband to put away his wife for using poisons, for substituting children, and for adultery.[74]

The famed poet Ovid (43 B.C.E – 17 C.E) wrote two poems on abortion in his compilation, *Amores*. The following lines are taken from his second poem:

> Where's the joy in a girl being free from fighting wars,
> unwilling to follow the army and their shields,
> if without battle she suffers wounds from her own weapons,
> and arms unsure hands to her own doom?

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[72] Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, 19.

[73] Euripides, *Andromache* 355-360 from *Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*, trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[74] Plutarch, *Romulus* 22.3 from *Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

> Whoever first taught the destruction of a tender foetus,
> deserved to die by her own warlike methods….
> Why rob the loaded vine of burgeoning grapes,
> or pluck the unripe apple with cruel hand?
> Let things mature themselves – grow without being forced:
> life is a prize that's worth a little waiting.
> Why submit your womb to probing instruments,
> or give lethal poison to what is not yet born?[75]

The late first/early second century poet Juvenal, known for his often scathing criticism of Roman life, offers the following thoughts in Book VI of his *Satires*:

> But at least these women undergo the dangers of childbirth and put up with all the work of nursing that their position in life forces on them. By contrast, hardly any woman lies in labour on a gilded bed. So powerful are the skills and drugs of the woman who manufactures sterility and takes contracts to kill humans inside the belly. Celebrate, you poor wretch. Offer your wife whatever she has to drink yourself. After all, if she were prepared to stretch and torture her womb with jumping baby boys, you'd perhaps turn out to be the father of an Ethiopian. Soon your will would be monopolized by your discoloured heir – whom you'd never want to see in the morning light.[76]

One explanation for this unbalanced emphasis on oral abortifacients in ancient literature is that the above-quoted works were all written by men, for whom abortions were a relatively secret and mysterious event. They had a basic understanding that ingestible drugs were available, although the details were largely unknown.[77] Interestingly, these drugs were also the most dangerous options. Very little thought is necessary to deduce that, as with other methods of abortion discussed below, "the main attraction of oral drugs was that they did not require extensive involvement of third parties. Recipes and drugs could be handed over from one woman to another, or from the midwife, the

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[75] Ovid, *Amores 2.14*, trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, http://www.poetryintranslation.com.
[76] Juvenal, *Satires* 5.592-602 from *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[77] Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, 19.

doctor, or the abortionist to a patient."[78] Then, in the privacy of her own home, away from the public and away from her husband and family, she might terminate an anticipated pregnancy, or attempt to prevent a future pregnancy. As with the privacy of oral drugs, prescribed pessaries to be inserted vaginally could be concocted at home, given the proper ingredients, and applied in private.[79] So too mechanical means, such as vigorous exercise, "guaranteed complete privacy and secrecy. Nobody needed to know about the woman's efforts to induce an abortion, or, indeed, the existence of the pregnancy."[80] Given the anxiety and taboo with which men conceptualized abortion in the ancient world – a consideration which we will subsequently consider in more depth – this covert, woman-to-woman network of knowledge, advice, and care was a highly crucial community through which women maintained control over their own bodies and reproductive choices. Through this self-supported female network, midwives assumed a high degree of autonomy, reinforcing their importance within Roman society. When men joined women as women's healthcare providers, this control was inevitably lessened or lost.

Theoretical basis for female inferiority within the Hippocratic and Greek traditions

Although one might assume the introduction of the professional midwife improved Roman women's healthcare, the development of professional midwifery was conjoined to the development of male-practiced medicine and consequently to increased male influence and involvement in the female arena of knowledge and experience. Male

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[78] Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, 18.
[79] *Ibid*., 21.
[80] *Ibid*., 24.

invasion of this arena predictably demoted the objectives and interests of the woman compared to those of the *paterfamilias*, with whom the doctor was (at least publicly) aligned. Moreover, the clearly androcentric theory and practice which male doctors brought to their patients intensified the biased care which women received.

In order to understand the roots of this male-centered medicine and the overall conception of women in the ancient world, let us turn to the Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of about sixty works that by the third century B.C.E. were ascribed to the Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460 B.C.E. – 370 B.C.E.).[81] The Corpus contains the earliest surviving medical texts of the ancient Greeks, and the theoretical arguments raised therein – particularly the gynecological theories – became influential to subsequent Greek physicians. A reading of the text "The Nature of the Child" uncovers the following:

> As for the fact that twins are born of which one is male, the other female, I maintain that in every man and in every woman – in fact in every animal – there exist both weaker and stronger varieties of sperm. Now the sperm does not come all at once: it comes out in two or three successive spasms. It is not possible that the first and last lot should always be of even strength. The pouch which receives thicker and stronger sperm will contain a male, while that which receives sperm which is more fluid and weaker will contain a female. If strong sperm enters both, both will contain male offspring; if the sperm is weak, both will contain female offspring.[82]

This biologically and physiologically inaccurate analysis portrays females as being physically weak – even at the moment of fertilization. Lacking is any understanding that the sperm itself is predetermined with male or female qualities, rather that the physical quality of the sperm upon ejaculation must transfer its characteristics to the fetus. This

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[81] Betty Radice, ed., *Hippocratic Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1950), 9.

[82] *On the Nature of the Child* 31.3 from *The Hippocratic Treatises "On Generation," "On the Nature of the Child," "Diseases IV,"* trans. Iain Lonie (New York: de Gruyter, 1981).

significance of the physical qualities of seed is demonstrated by the fact that the theory was still used by the physician Galen seven hundred years later. Like the Hippocratic texts, Galen promoted the existence of both a maternal and a paternal seed, and he believed that the former was less perfect than the latter.[83] In determining the sex of the fetus, Galen believed "the hotter environment and internal essence of the male embryo also determines some of its characteristics. It is more solid [than female seed]… – that is, stronger and more robust – and moves, is collected, and constructed more briskly."[84] Again, we find prominent physicians insisting on the inferior status of the female in relation to reproductive seed, both in the weaker seed that nourishes them compared to males, and in the weaker seed women produce to subsequently generate a new embryo.

Not all references to the inferiority of the female sex are quite as blatant as the above accounts. In "Aphorisms" we find the following nuggets:

> If, in a woman pregnant with twins, either of her breasts lose its fullness, she will part with one of her children; and if it be the right breast which becomes slender, it will be the male child, or if the left, the female.[85]

> The male foetus is usually seated in the right, and the female in the left side.[86]

Traditional Greco-Roman symbolism endowed right-handedness with the positive and left-handedness with the negative. Modern English vocabulary encapsulates these associations in our derivatives from Latin. The Latin word for left hand, *sinister*, has evolved into our modern adjective for that which is unfavorable or evil; *dexter*, Latin for right hand, used in the contexts of dexterity and dextrous, now refers to physical or

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[83] Jan Blayney, "Theories of Conception in the Ancient Roman World," *The Family in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986), 234.
[84] Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 310.
[85] *Aphorisms* 5.38 from *The Genuine Works of Hippocrates*, trans. Charles Darwin Adams (New York, Dover: 1868).
[86] *Ibid*., 5.48.

mental skill and competence. Similarly in Greek, δεξιά**,** right hand, derived into the Latin *dexter*, while ἀριστερός, left hand, was simultaneously a metaphor for "boding ill, [or] ominous, because to a Greek augur, looking northward, the unlucky signs came from the left."[87] If we apply these understandings to the aforementioned aphorisms, we see a direct link between females and negativity, and males and positivity. A deflated right breast, or a leaning to the right in utero is characteristic of a male fetus, while a deflated left breast, or a leaning to the left in utero suggests a female fetus. The "Aphorisms" text offers another delightfully harsh medical note to distinguish between a male and female fetus:

> A woman with child, if it be a male, has a good color, but if a female, she has a bad color.[88]

Soranus appears to be the first to directly oppose these claims, roughly half a millennium post-Hippocrates. Yet his chapter, "What are the signs and symptoms according to the ancients, whether the fetus is male or female?" provides additional information as to commonly held beliefs regarding this subject:

> Hippocrates says that <the signs> of pregnancy with a male are: the gravida has better color, moves with more ease, her right breast is bigger, firmer, fuller, and in particular the nipple is swollen. Whereas the signs with a female are that together with pallor, the left breast is more enlarged and in particular the nipple. This conclusion he has reached from a false assumption. For he believed a male to be formed if the seed were conceived in the right part of the uterus, a female, on the other hand, if in the left part. But in the physiological commentaries "On Generation" we proved this untrue. Other people say that if the fetus is male, the gravida will feel its movements to be more acute and vehement; if, however, it is female, the movements will be both slower and more sluggish, while the gravida too moves with less ease and has a stronger inclination to vomiting. For they say that the good color in women with a male child results from the exercise caused by the movement of the fetus; while the

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[87] H.G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), 116-7.
[88] *Aphorisms*, 5.42.

> bad color in women with a female child is due to the inactivity of the fetus. But these things are more plausible than true, in as much as on the evidence we see that sometimes one thing, sometimes the opposite, has resulted.[89]

In this account, we find additional formulae equating the male fetus with vigor, energy, and the right side, while the female is equated with listlessness, lethargy, and the left side. The fact that the unborn female child is thus branded with negative associations translates into pure, unadulterated sexism.

This sexism cycles back to Hippocratic medical theory in a most unappealing way. A reading of the Corpus shows the prevalence of prescriptions involving the use of feces.

> If dropsy appears in the uterus, the menses are less and become painful and stop early, and the lower belly swells….The woman must wash with lots of warm water and apply fomentations if there is swelling. When the swelling disappears she must drink a purgative, and fumigate the uterus with cow dung. Then apply the dung with blister-beetle and leave for two or three days.[90]

> An aid to conception….A fumigant – hulwort, ass' hairs, wolf's excrement.[91]

> A purgative which is able to cleanse a childless woman, if the cervix is straight. Make a vapour bath using dried cow-dung, four choenix chopped up and sifted, and ten cotyles vinegar, and just as much of cow urine, and twenty cotyles of sea water.[92]

As von Staden teaches in his enlightening article, "Women and Dirt," the therapeutic use of excrement was not unique to Hippocratic medicine, for its use continued throughout Greek medicine and even Roman therapies employed animal dung.[93] However his research showed that excrement therapy in the Hippocratic Corpus was prescribed only for women. He submits, "neither in other Mediterranean cultures nor in the subsequent

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[89] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.13.45.

[90] *Diseases of Women* 1.59. from "Hippocrates' Diseases Of Women Book 1 - Greek Text with English Translation and Footnotes," trans. Kathleen Whiteley (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2009).

[91] *Ibid*., 1.75.

[92] *Ibid.,* 1.85.

[93] Heinrich von Staden, "Women and Dirt," *Helios* 19, no. 1 and 2 (1992), 8. For Roman therapies using feces see Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 28.77 and 30.43-45.

Greek medical tradition is such a gender-determined restriction at work."[94] Crucial to his analysis is von Staden's argument that feces were considered just as repulsive, polluting, and undesirable among the ancients as they are today.[95] Hippocratic medicine thus prescribed remedies with these revolting ingredients for women only – an intellectual and pragmatic tactic masking an underlying sexism and oppression of women.

We have previously covered the theoretical basis of female submission to male power within the medical context. That women were physiologically distinct from men was quite apparent to the ancients, although even when men did interpret female anatomy, they analyzed it using a male template. The prominent Alexandrian doctor Herophilus (330/320 B.C.E. – 260/250 B.C.E.), revolutionary for his vivisection of human subjects and the wealth of anatomical knowledge he gained therein, embodied this mode of thinking.[96] In his comprehensive volume on Herophilus and the Herophileans, von Staden elucidates surviving fragments of Herophilus' work.

> Conspicuous advances on his predecessors [regarding anatomical accuracy] are found in Herophilus' anatomy of the female reproductive organs. Yet, though he seems to have abandoned the traditional theory of a two-chambered uterus, he did not always succeed in emancipating himself from the common tendency in antiquity to base explanations of female organs on the analogy of male organs. Even where he seems to have taken some halting steps away from the male model, he remains fundamentally enslaved to it. Thus he expressly denies that the human female has the same 'varix-like' assistants or ampullae of the *vasa defentia* as the male, but when he describes the ovaries and the ducts leading from them, his description stands squarely in the shadow of the male model. The ovaries are called 'twins' – a standard word in Greek medical literature for the testicles – and they are said to '*differ only a little from the testicles of the male.*' Similarly, while recognizing that tubes proceed from

[94] von Staden, "Women and Dirt," 9.

[95] *Ibid.*

[96] Heinrich von Staden, *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 36, 138.

> each of the two ovaries, Herophilus failed to recognize the true course or function of the Fallopian tubes. Calling them 'spermatic ducts', after the male analogy, he concluded that 'the spermatic duct from each testicle [sc. ovary] grows into the fleshy part of the neck of the bladder, *just like the male duct*.'[97]

As we shall see later, this imposition of the male model upon the anatomy of the female was long-lasting, as nearly four hundred years later Soranus continued to adhere to the views first laid out by Herophilus.[98]

Furthermore, anatomical distinction between the sexes was hardly a case of 'different but equal.' Under his discussion on "Whether women have conditions particularly their own," Soranus notes that "the female is by nature different from the male, so much so that Aristotle and Zenon the Epicurean say that the female is imperfect, the male, however, perfect."[99] Presumably he deduced this from Aristotle's comment, "a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment."[100] These comments beautifully sum up the ancient understanding of the female as the exception to the male, inferior to the male, or inherently lacking compared to the male. Undeniably, these intellectual beliefs helped to shape the inferior status of women within the medical context, and molded a theory of gynecology from a distinctly male perspective and bias.

Rather telling is the gaping lack of information on women available in Celsus' first century C.E. detailed tractate *De Medicina*, "On Medicine." The silencing of women in Celsus' professional medical discourse suggests either that he thought women's care

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[97] von Staden, *Herophilus,* 167-8.

[98] See page 37.

[99] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 3.3.

[100] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* I. 20; 728, trans. A.L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).

was not important enough to include in his treatise (although this is rather unlikely given that continuation of the family line, a core Roman value, was dependent on a woman's health) or that care of women was simply based on care of men.[101]

Soranus, too, writing during the bridge between the first and second centuries C.E. comments, "The public is wont to call in midwives in cases of sickness when the women suffer something peculiar which they do not have in common with men."[102] We learn from this that the Greek medical model to which Soranus subscribed was wholly androcentric, its theory and practice based on male health. Soranus himself was rather progressive in acknowledging that "there exist natural conditions in women peculiarly their own (as conception, parturition, and lactation if one wishes to call these functions conditions)" yet this comment still reveals him steeped in tunnel-visioned masculinity, which closed the door to more inclusive modes of medical practice.[103] For as he explains,

> Only as far as particulars and specific variations are concerned does the female show conditions particularly her own, i.e. a different character of symptoms. Therefore she is subject to treatment generically the same, as will be understood more plainly by the following remarks.[104]

We may interpret "treatment generically the same" to be "the same as men." Soranus was therefore a proponent of treating women according to treatment for male pathologies. This was problematic because, although unbeknownst to the ancients, women and men are not biologically identical and therefore require different action; consider our current knowledge on differences in hormone levels, for example. Only

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[101] Celsus, *On Medicine*, vol. 1-3, trans. W.G. Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935-8).
[102] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 3.3.
[103] *Ibid.*, 3.5.
[104] *Ibid.*

when a woman's medical profile did not match up to standard male pathologies were the experienced female clinicians were called in to aid the doctor. These midwives possessed a strong reputation as female healthcare providers and yet their function as doctor's assistants, rather than primary caregivers limited their efficacy.

Our most comprehensive understanding of women's healthcare and the role of midwives within male-centered medical theory can be found in Soranus' *Gynecology*, the most complete volume of ancient gynecological practice still in existence. Written at the turn of the second century C.E., the volume served to the ancient readers as both an instructional manual for midwives and treatise on the roles of midwives; treatment of women before, during, and after childbirth; care of the newborn; and treatments for various other gynecological conditions. For the modern reader, the volume lays out such biases, theories, and practices as we have discussed and provides the foundation for deep understanding of the submission of women – both midwives and patients – to the patriarchal society from a medical perspective.

Soranus as evidence for social and medical attitudes in the treatment of women

As with many ancient authors, little is known of Soranus' personal life. From his Suidas biography we do know that he was born at Ephesus, in Asia Minor, likely in the second half of the first century C.E. He studied and practiced in the Egyptian city Alexandria, the great center of scientific medicine, later moving to Rome where he practiced under the emperors Trajan (98-117 C.E.) and Hadrian (117-138 C.E.). Soranus was a prolific medical writer, authoring nearly twenty works on a spectrum of topics including gynecology, internal medicine, surgery, hygiene, ophthalmology, and medical

history, of which few have survived. Extant Greek writings include short discourses "On Bandages," "On Fractures," and "Life of Hippocrates." His major work *On Acute and Chronic Diseases* was preserved in the Latin translation by Caelius Aurelianus of the fifth or sixth century. But the most important of his surviving works is indisputably *Gynecology*.[105]

A male doctor in ancient Rome writing a treatise on gynecology for midwives increased existing gender-specific tensions for two main reasons. First, it squeezed the field of gynecology, an inherently female-focused domain, into the male domain of knowledge and experience. As we have thus far analyzed, this created immense tension between female agency over female healthcare and male arrogance embodied in male power, as manifested by doctors who claimed to be more capable and more authoritative at understanding and treating women's bodies than were women. This is inextricably linked to a second consequence of Soranus' work – the molding of midwives into agents of the male physician's interests. The midwives, who before were a network of women's agents within the male-dominated society, became mere extensions of the doctor rather than autonomous practitioners in their own right – yet another attack on the liberty which women possessed in their jobs as midwives, and on their patients who were recipients of such care. By preaching male-skewed gynecology to midwives, the doctors were extending their biases to female patients even when a doctor was not present during an exam or procedure, thus compounding women's inferior societal status with a universal patriarchally-rooted medical system.

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[105] Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology*, xxiii-xxiv.

A reading of Soranus' *Gynecology* unearths a treasure trove of material, a plethora of evidences to confirm such a claim. From the very beginning, when describing (rather incorrectly) the internal anatomy of a woman, Soranus asserts:

> Furthermore, the didymi [i.e. ovaries] are attached to the outside of the uterus, near its isthmus, one on each side….Their shape is not longish as in the males; rather they are slightly flattened, rounded and a little broadened at the base. The seminal duct runs from the uterus through each didymus and extending along the sides of the uterus as far as the bladder, is implanted in its neck. Therefore, the female seed seems not to be drawn upon in generation since it is excreted externally.[106]

Echoing the anatomy described by Herophilus,[107] Soranus uses the male body as the basis of comparison and describes the ovaries as female testicles, whose shape is similar to, but not exactly that of the males' organs. Consequently, he assumes the fallopian tubes to be seminal ducts. These two assumptions necessarily bring forth the belief that women excrete seed just as men do. As female reproductive organs are internal and hidden from view, it is understandable that the ancients might have postulated false ideas on the use and organization of all the parts. However, it requires a certain lack of humility, if not outright narcissism, to assume female parts mirrored those of men in form and function. Furthermore, even when the woman is presumed to excrete seed just as her male example, Soranus deduces that the seed is not actually used in fertilization, implying that the male seed is dominant in reproduction. This theory would have conveniently served as a testament to Roman law, by which children legally belonged to the *paterfamilias* with no formal ties to the mother.

The mysteriousness of the female body must have proved quite a feat for the Greek or Roman male (or female) to figure out. Thus, when Soranus could not locate

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[106] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.3.12.

[107] See page 33 for details.

certain parts – such as the hymen – that women claimed to possess (and whose existence even other doctors acknowledged), he dismissed its existence, relying on his own male eyes rather than midwives' centuries of personal and caregiving experience:

> For it is a mistake to assume that a thin membrane grows across the vagina, dividing it, and that this membrane causes pain when it bursts in defloration or if menstruation occurs too quickly….for…in virgins, the probe ought to meet with resistance (whereas the probe penetrates to the deepest point). Third, if this membrane, bursting in defloration, were the cause of pain, then in virgins before defloration excessive pain ought necessarily to follow upon the appearance of menstruation and no more in defloration.[108]

Clearly, Soranus is aware of the non-mythical hymen, yet he absolutely insists that that which he cannot see does not exist, rather than relying on testimony from females on their own bodies. Interestingly, although he conceives of an alternate explanation for bleeding during first intercourse, this apparently satisfactory answer is also unable to be visualized.

> In virgins the vagina is flattened and comparatively narrow, since it possesses furrows held together by vessels which take their origin from the uterus. And when the furrows are spread apart in defloration, these vessels burst and cause pain and the blood which is usually excreted follows.[109]

This absolute disregard of the hymen presumably had relevant implications for understanding female dyspareunia (painful intercourse), and other problems with intercourse. Without the understanding that a tearing hymen can cause great pain, misdiagnoses and improper treatments likely abounded for many sad, scared women.

As discussed in Chapter II, Soranus devotes several pages to the inquiry "whether permanent virginity is healthful."[110] While he ultimately concludes that permanent virginity is the best option healthwise, he understands the need for intercourse to

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[108] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.3.17.
[109] *Ibid*., 1.3.16
[110] *Ibid.*, 1.7.30.

continue the Roman race. Thus he posits the age up until which a girl ought to remain a virgin.

> It is good to preserve the state of virginity until menstruation begins by itself. For this will be a definite sign that the uterus is already able to fulfill its proper functions, one of which, as we have said before, <is> also conception.[111]

Quite blatantly, Soranus advises men (or directs midwives to advise men) to wait and have sex with their wives only when these women are sexually mature and ready to bear children. As discussed in Chapter II, this insistence that the focus of sex in marriage was not on marital intimacy, but rather on what intimacy might produce in the form of heirs, led to justifying divorce on the grounds of female infertility. It is important to note the absence of awareness that men might be contributors to a couple's infertility as well.

After acknowledging the proper age for women to begin intercourse, Soranus advises the best time for productive intercourse – that is, when a woman would be most likely to conceive a pregnancy. He teaches:

> [One of the guidelines for the best time for fruitful intercourse is] when urge and appetite for coitus are present….For even if some women who were forced to have intercourse have conceived, one may say with reference to them that in any event the emotion of sexual appetite existed in them too, but was obscured by mental resolve.[112]

This is a truly frightening statement of Soranus' for it embodies a male justification for assuming the female experiences pleasure during rape. If a woman conceives a child as a result of a rape, then according to Soranus' ideology, she must have been aroused and enjoyed the act even if her virtue dictated she must not enjoy it, or if her conscious experience of the event was unpleasant. This philosophy entirely usurps the woman's victimhood and leaves pregnancy-inducing rape with positive associations, allowing

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[111] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.8.33.
[112] *Ibid.*, 1.10.37.

little room for acknowledging the male force and violence part of the equation. Only a true deeply-entrenched patriarchy such as that of ancient Rome could offer up such a validation for forceful male dominance.[113]

Male appropriation of women's decision-making is abundantly apparent in Soranus' discussion on abortion and contraception. As with many of his theoretical interludes, Soranus offers the proponent and opponent views before revealing where on the spectrum his opinion falls:

> *Whether one ought to make use of abortives and contraceptives and how?*....A controversy has arisen. For one party banishes abortives, citing the testimony of Hippocrates who says: "I will give to no one an abortive"; moreover, because it is the specific task of medicine to guard and preserve what has been engendered by nature. The other party prescribes abortives, but with discrimination, that is, they do not prescribe them when a person wishes to destroy the embryo because of adultery or out of consideration for youthful beauty; but only to prevent subsequent danger in parturition if the uterus is small and not capable of accommodating the complete development, or if the uterus at its orifice has knobby swellings and fissures, or if some similar difficulty is involved. And they say the same about contraceptives as well, and we too agree with them.[114]

The very fact that a man, Soranus, self-servingly assumes authority to decide such matters for women is at best misuse of authority. Moving away from the woman-to-woman network of advice, Soranus takes it upon himself to advise midwives regarding the appropriate time to offer, if ever, an abortion or contraception. For cases of vanity or to mask an affair, Soranus forbids abortions, limiting them only to situations that a doctor may diagnose would prevent dangerous pregnancies or childbirths, situations for

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[113] In fact, rape in antiquity was condemned not because of the woman's traumatic experience, but because it was seizure of another man's property, be it the *paterfamilias* or the husband. According to Pomeroy, "rape could be prosecuted – under the legal headings of criminal wrong (*inuria*) or violence (*vis*) – by the man under whose authority the wronged woman fell" (160). Evidence may easily be found in laws dealing with rape of someone else's slave. Although rape was typically a capital charge, "if the woman raped was a slave, no capital charge could lie, but presumably the master would be able…to bring an action for damages under the *lex Aquilia*." Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 119.

[114] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.19.60.

which an abortion is deemed necessary in a male dominated world. For cases that fall outside this crucial criterion, i.e. cases in which a woman herself might request a termination of pregnancy with or without an explanation, Soranus' teaching does not condone the abortion, leaving a woman to perhaps attempt dangerous abortive techniques on her own.[115] That Soranus forbids abortion on certain grounds suggests that women were known (or believed) to request abortive drugs for reasons of adultery, vanity, or rape and sheds light on the morality of Rome during his era.

An analysis of the specific abortive and contraceptive therapies that Soranus prescribes reminds the reader that the instructions are intended for the intermediary caregivers, i.e. midwives, to perform. The wording used in his advice assumes that someone is watching over the woman to aid in the procedure, and implies Soranus' preference that the procedure should not be performed by the woman alone. By his estimation, a woman who was denied an abortion would be unable to circumvent the rejection of care by attempting any of these prescriptions herself. Let us look at several examples of these techniques.

> It also aids in preventing conception to smear the orifice of the uterus all over before [coitus] with old olive oil or honey or cedar resin or juice of the balsam tree, alone or together with white lead; or with a moist cerate containing myrtle oil and white lead; or before the act with moist alum, or with galbanum together with wine; or to put a lock of fine wool into the orifice of the uterus; or, before sexual relations to use vaginal suppositories which have the power to contract and to condense.[116]

> If [the previously mentioned abortives are] without effect, one must also treat locally by having her sit in a bath of decoction of linseed, fenugreek, mallow, marsh mallow, and wormwood. She must also use poultices of the same

[115] It is fascinating to consider how little progress has been made – if at all – in this arena over the past two millennia, as many of today's politicians' boast healthcare platforms that knowingly or unknowingly side with the ancient doctor Soranus.

[116] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.19.61.

> substances and have injections of old oil, alone or together with rue juice or maybe with honey, or of iris oil, or of absinthium together with honey, or of panax balm or else of spelt together with rue and honey, or of Syrian unguent. And if the situation remains the same she must no longer apply the common poultices, but those made of meal of lupines together with ox bile and absinthium, <and she must use> plasters of a similar kind.[117]
>
> For a woman who intends to have an abortion, it is necessary for two or even three days beforehand to take protracted baths, little food and to use softening vaginal suppositories; also to abstain from wine; then to be bled and a relatively large quantity to be taken away….Following the venesection one must shake her by means of draught animals [i.e. by riding in a carriage drawn by animals]…and one must use softening vaginal suppositories. But if a woman reacts unfavorably to venesection and is languid, one must first relax the parts by means of sitz baths, full baths, softening vaginal suppositories, by keeping her on water and limited food, and by means of aperients and the application of a softening clyster; afterwards, one must apply an abortive vaginal suppository….And she who intends to apply these things should be bathed beforehand or made to relax by sitz baths; and if after some time she brings forth nothing, she should again be relaxed by sitz baths and for the second time a suppository should be applied….After the abortion, one must treat for inflammation.[118]

All of the above examples reveal a lack of reflexive pronouns, indicating that the woman herself is not performing these techniques. Regarding the first quote of recipes to prevent conception, it may be assumed that a woman would be unable to apply the concoctions to the orifice of her own uterus, implying the aid of a second party. The second quote advises, "one must also treat locally by having her sit in a bath," using two different characters to convey the presence of the helper. In the third quote, various direct references to the use of a healer abound. A woman must "be bled," as she will clearly not bleed herself, and then "one must shake her by means of draught animals," which Temkin deciphers to mean being placed in an animal-drawn carriage and driven

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[117] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.19.64.
[118] *Ibid.*, 1.19.65.

around for passive exercise.[119] The prescription of vaginal suppositories, too, is recorded as "one must use vaginal suppositories" directly after the "one must shake her" advice, showing that even suppositories, which are able to be self-administered, ought instead to be dispensed by the midwife or doctor, moving the locus of control from the patient to the (male or male-instructed) caregiver.

It is interesting to note that the majority of contraceptives and abortives prescribed by Soranus are recipes to be applied to the cervix or inserted into the vagina. Since Soranus appears to discourage women (intentionally or unintentionally) from retaining control over their own reproductivity, it follows that Soranus believed a woman would need help in applying these suppositories, preventing her from surreptitiously preventing or ending an undesired pregnancy without consent of her family or, ultimately, her community. Contrary to the trend of using oral contraceptives and abortives due to ability to procure and ingest them privately,[120] we find few references to oral drugs in *Gynecology*. In fact, Soranus vehemently opposes oral abortives with the following claim:

> However, these things not only prevent conception but also destroy any already existing. In our opinion, moreover, the evil from these things is too great, since they damage and upset the stomach and besides cause congestion of the head and induce sympathetic reactions.[121]

While Soranus gives a rational (and likely accurate) explanation for his disapproval of such draughts, as the potions probably were extremely potent and harmful to the

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[119] See Temkin page 66, footnote 128.

[120] Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, 18. See also page 25-6 in this text.

[121] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.19.63.

mother as well as the fetus,[122] there is little doubt that his disapproval is tainted with a man's self-centered desire to keep control of reproductive choice away from women.

The mother's choice is once again a moot point in Soranus' next section, "How to recognize the newborn that is worth rearing."[123] While Soranus does not employ any overt sexism here, for example by advising to save male infants more readily while exposing female infants to the elements to die, the fact that he recorded advice for midwives to determine which babies are born with the correct strength to live is in itself a mechanism of hypercontrol over the mother (and the father, too, who traditionally wielded the authority to let his child live or die[124]). The midwives of early imperial Rome, agents of male-infused medicine, were taught to assess a baby's right to live, ignoring the viewpoint and needs of the woman who carried the child till birth.

Once the newborn is proclaimed fit to rear, Soranus next teaches the best method of nourishment:

> From the second day on after the treatment [of prescribed foods for the newborn's first two days of life], one should feed with milk from somebody well able to serve as a wet nurse, as for twenty days the maternal milk is in most cases unwholesome, being thick, too caseous, and therefore hard to digest, raw, and not prepared to perfection.[125]

Deeming a mother's milk "unwholesome" and "not prepared to perfection" against the very ways of nature is a means of demoting the mother's status as caretaker of the child. Furthermore, a prohibition against maternal breastfeeding for the first three weeks of life causes a disruption of the baby's bond with its mother, and vice versa. Lest one credit modern science with this discovery, one need only read ahead a few sentences:

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[122] Kapparis, *Abortion in the Ancient World*, 12-19.
[123] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.6.10[79].
[124] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 16.
[125] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.11.17[86].

> To be sure, other things being equal, it is better to feed the child with maternal milk; for this is more suited to it, and the mothers become more sympathetic to the offspring.[126]

Ancients, too, recognized full well the significance of breast feeding, and thus keeping the child from its mother during the frequent feeding periods would certainly have dampened the initial attachment between mother and child, which ultimately might have strengthened a father's relationship with and control over his child down the road.

Soranus follows up this advice with sections "On the selection of a wet nurse,"[127] "On testing the milk,"[128] and "How to conduct the regimen of the nurse."[129] Such instructions again have men counseling women on what otherwise would have been a system of experienced women supporting and guiding the less experienced and naïve.

The above accounts deal generally with male usurpation of female choice and power over her own body. But direct attacks on females on the basis of female inferiority can also be found embedded within Soranus' rich text. "On difficult labor" reads:

> Now difficult labor is occasioned by the parturient, when the cause is <either> in the psychic faculty or in the vital faculty, that is to say in the body. And it lies <in> the psychic faculty when there is grief, joy, fear, timidity, lack of energy, anger <or> extreme indulgence (for some women are spoiled and do not exert themselves). Moreover, it occurs because of ignorance of childbearing, <so that they do not> cooperate with the pains of labor….Difficult labor also occurs because of the idea of not being pregnant.[130]

Here, Soranus attributes the difficulty of birth not to uncontrollable biological or environmental factors, but to a woman's state of mind. She is blameworthy if her

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[126] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.11.18[87].
[127] *Ibid*., 2.12.19[88].
[128] *Ibid*., 2.13.21[90].
[129] *Ibid*., 2.14.24[93].
[130] *Ibid.*, 4.1.2[54].

emotions stray anywhere from calm and centered, or if, being a new mother and inexperienced with the birth process, she is unprepared for the momentous and arduous event. She is also culpable if she is anxious about her pregnancy or in denial that such changes are occurring to her body. Women are thus represented as a weak sex, prey to their emotions and at the mercy of their (inferior) mental capacities. We find a similar belief in the section "On prolapse of the uterus," where Soranus instructs:

> But it has also occurred through mental stress; for when the loss of children or the approach of enemies was announced, or when women were exposed to severe storms at sea, they suffered a prolapse, their whole physique being relaxed, so that the uterus slipped out.[131]

The incident of a uterus prolapsing on account of grief or fear conveys the common opinion on the weakness of women's minds and their presumed propensity to physically break down under stressors.

This male-oriented insistence on a relationship between emotionality and gynecology can also be found in the earliest notions of hysteria. Hysteria was viewed as a syndrome comprised of a set of variable symptoms including but not limited to fainting, nervousness, insomnia, sensations of heaviness in the abdomen, muscle spasms, choking and shortness of breath, edema or hyperemia (congestion caused by local or general fluid retention), loss of appetite, and lack of interest in sex with the approved male partner.[132] The text "On Diseases of Women" from the Hippocratic Corpus was the first to elucidate these mysterious symptoms as a disease of the womb, a fact which subsequently led to naming the disease after the Greek word ὑστέρα meaning 'uterus.' More specifically, the ancients believed that the uterus was a mobile organ which caused

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[131] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 4.15.35[84].

[132] Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*" (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 23.

hysterical disease when it moved around (a notion later termed the 'wandering womb').[133] Relevant to our discussion of androcentric medicine is Hanson's remark that since the male body held no uterus, the human body had no defined place for it to reside and therefore it was free to move about.[134] Soranus, too, discusses "hysterical suffocation" and its symptoms at length, prescribing a variety of treatments to calm the afflicted and agitated patient.[135] Consistent with the way he correlates women and weakness, Soranus mutes the voice of female midwifery throughout his treatise in favor of male perspective and perception.

Yet Soranus hardly neglected the pivotal role that midwives played in Greco-Roman medicine. On the contrary, he recognized their ubiquity and universal desirability by female patients and wrote his medical volume specifically aimed at training them according to his principles. Thus a midwife paying a house call on her own would come armed with Soranus' teachings, including his prejudices and masculine preferences, in essence acting as an agent of the male physician's interests. This is how we begin to read *Gynecology* as Soranus writes:

> It is useful to begin the writing by dividing the subject into parts and sections….[unlike other medical treatises which organize on the basis of theory, and practice, or physiology, pathology, and therapy] we, however,

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[133] "For there is in fact an empty space in which [the uterus] is able to turn, because the belly is empty; when the womb turns it lies on the liver, and they go together and lie against the abdomen. For the womb runs towards and goes upwards to the moisture, because it becomes unusually dry through the hard work. The liver is moist, and when the womb lies against the liver, sudden choking occurs when the breathing outlet is stopped around the womb. At the same time, when the womb begins to strike against the liver, phlegm also flows down from the head into the abdomen so that the woman chokes. Simultaneously, when the womb goes with the flow of the phlegm, it goes into a position away from the liver, and the choking stops." *Diseases of Women* 1.7.

[134] Ann Ellis Hanson, "Continuity and Change: Three Case Studies in Hippocratic Gynecological Therapy and Theory," *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 82.

[135] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 3.4.26-29.

> divide the subject into two sections: into one on the midwife and into another on the things with which the midwife is faced.[136]

Soranus organized his entire volume to instruct once autonomous and independent midwives how to care for women in their most dangerous and vulnerable conditions – conditions with which experienced midwives would have had significantly more familiarity and personal experience than any doctor.

Considering "what persons are fit to become midwives?" Soranus proposes:

> She must be literate in order to be able to comprehend the art through theory too; she must have her wits about her so that she may easily follow what is said and what is happening; she must have a good memory to retain the imparted instructions.[137]

How interesting that one of Soranus' prerequisites for ability as a caretaker in a largely illiterate world[138] is literacy and a sound mind, in order to follow and remember the instructions of Soranus and other male-written treatises. Soranus is essentially advocating integration of midwives into the elite, male-authored medical world, though still under the authority of the doctors. He also proposes:

> She must be respectable since people will have to trust their household and the secrets of their lives to her.[139]

His use of the word "household" here is significant as the implication is that reproduction is not a personal matter but one that belongs to the entire household, and namely the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household. The reference to women's secrets is interesting as well, for Soranus is implying that a patient confides in a midwife

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[136] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.1.
[137] *Ibid.*, 1.1.3.
[138] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 157-8.
[139] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.1.3.

perhaps more readily than a male doctor. We find this elsewhere in his section on "what must one do in delivery," where he notes:

> There should be three woman helpers, capable of gently allaying the anxiety of the gravida even if they do not happen to have had experience with birth….Furthermore it is proper that the face of the gravida should be visible to the midwife who shall allay her anxiety, assuring her that there is nothing to fear and that delivery will be easy.[140]

In this way Soranus recognizes the boundary that personal comfort plays in the medical setting, acknowledges the need for female intermediaries, and uses these intermediaries to perform male-dictated medicine.

Utilizing the midwives to serve as agents of male authority, Soranus lays out a thorough formula identifying those who make the best midwives; for who doesn't desire to be the best in one's field? He writes:

> Now generally speaking we call a midwife faultless if she merely carries out her medical task; whereas we call her the best midwife if she goes further and in addition to her management of cases is well-versed in theory. And more particularly, we call a person the best midwife if she is trained in all branches of therapy (for some cases must be treated by diet, others by surgery, while still others must be cured by drugs).[141]

Training "in all branches of therapy" requires an instructor, or at the very least an instructional manual. Who is supplying such a comprehensive manual? Soranus, a male physician.

Given all the evidence plucked straight from Soranus' manual showing just how male-dominated Greco-Roman medicine influenced the type of care given to women, it is important to elucidate that Soranus does not appear overtly antagonistic towards women, neither his patients nor the midwives. On the contrary, he does value the

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[140] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.3.5[70a].
[141] *Ibid.*, *1*.2.4.

midwives to an extent, even noting, "In cases of difficult labor, the physician should also question the midwife."[142] Presumably the thought processes behind this question flow along the lines of, "Okay, you have read my tracts on gynecology. Given that crucial background knowledge now tell me, what do you think?" Thus, Soranus makes it clear that while midwives were hardly obsolete in the new world of male physicians, they no longer functioned independently within the often mysterious network of women, but rather as extensions of the doctor. It was through these extensions that doctors such as Soranus sought to spread their understanding of female medicine, while inherently advocating their own agendas of patriarchy and male dominance.

[142] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 4.2.7[59].

Chapter IV: Augustan Marriage Laws and the invasion of the private domain by the state

The women of ancient Rome faced daily oppression and patriarchal pressures emanating from all facets of the community, from the obvious and entwined social customs and legal ritual, to the less obvious realm of Hellenized medicine. What the aforementioned societal institutions all had in common, as we have discussed in the previous two chapters, was an effort to control woman's reproductive choice. For reproduction was a powerful event, one that could make or break families, ensure lineage, secure property within a household, and permit the formation of familial and political alliances. Procreation and reproduction were thus interwoven with politics, a historically un-feminine realm. Perhaps then it is hardly surprising that the feminine sphere of sexuality was invaded from yet another force – a state-sponsored entity – at the start of the Empire, with the rise to power of the emperor Augustus in 27 B.C.E. Father of the Roman Empire, Augustus radically transformed Rome and extended his influence not only into the vast Euro-Asian and African continents but into his subjects' private affairs as well. With the proclamation of his new marriage laws, punishing singlehood and childlessness while offering coveted rewards for marriage and procreation, Augustus sought to influence personal reproductive choices, not only interfering with female choice, but also spreading control over men by prohibiting the *paterfamilias* from harboring the locus of control for reproductive concerns. While evidence indicates that these policies were unsuccessful in increasing the birth rate, Augustus effectively disrupted the boundary between public and private domains, and added more tension to the already ubiquitous struggles between men and women.

The impetus for the so-called 'Augustan marriage laws' is a topic of debate among scholars. Indubitably, Augustus sought to replenish the Roman stock with true, full-blooded Romans. Treggiari, in her comprehensive volume *Roman Marriage*, notes, "When Caesar controlled the state, Cicero advised him to encourage the propagation of children. There is a possibility that he offered rewards to fathers of large families. Once Octavian [Augustus] had consolidated his power, he claimed to be a new founder of the state, and such claims involved a set of expectations. Augustus must aspire to be a father of cities."[143] As the *paterfamilias* of the Roman people, it was thus Augustus' obligation to breed Roman stock in order to continue the Roman line, as any respectable *paterfamilias* would desire for his family.

Continuation of the Roman race, however, is hardly the only justification proposed for such invasive policies. Treggiari also notes that "the need to encourage nuptiality and reproductivity in order to supply Rome with soldiers and administrators appears to have been prominent in the minds of Augustus and his advisors."[144] In fact, the elegiac poet Propertius (c. 50 B.C.E. – 15 C.E.) comments on just that in his elegy against the marriage laws:

> Is it for me to supply sons for our country's triumphs?
> There'll be no soldiers from my line.[145]

Other scholars are quick to point out that the specifics of the incentives and penalties of the Augustan marriage laws were really aimed at the elite classes, "since more of the penalties were inapplicable to those of meager income or no political aspirations"[146];

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[143] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 59.
[144] *Ibid.*, 60-1.
[145] Propertius, *Elegies* 2.7, trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, http://www.poetryintranslation.com.
[146] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 86.

therefore, as soldiers from peasant and lower classes bulked up the army, it is not clear that replenishment of the *entire* Roman stock was chief amongst Augustus' concerns. Rather, he was probably interested in maintaining a strong elite class. Believing both theories to be valid and probable, Brunt surmises that, although there were no systematic incentives for the poorer classes to reproduce, probably because of the limitation of the treasury, Augustus did wish all classes of Romans to populate, and rewarded even wealthier freedmen for having children.[147] Simultaneously, Dixon believes it "moot whether Augustus hoped by his legislation to replenish the Italian peasantry or simply the ruling class. Quite apart from any specific aims, he hoped to inculcate a stronger sense of moral responsibility in his subjects and to make marriage and parenthood desirable."[148] From Augustus' own account of his life accomplishments, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, we read,

> By the passage of new laws I restored many traditions of our ancestors which were then falling into disuse, and I myself set precedents in many things for posterity to imitate.[149]

Romans tended to idealize their ancestors as embodying pure morality. Thus, Augustus sought to restore this morality by laying out the marriage laws. For whomever the laws were initially intended, we shall focus on the effects and implications they had on the elite and ruling classes, since the majority of our surviving evidence derives from there, and because the entire paper has thus far focused on members of the upper classes.

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147 P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 558-566.

148 Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 72. See also Plate 2, a frieze from the Ara Pacis showing the adults and children of Augustus' family.

149 Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 8 from *Velleius Paterculus and Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. Frederick R. Shipley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

The Augustan marriage laws were introduced in two waves. The first piece of legislation, proposed by Augustus himself in 18 B.C.E., was the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, the Julian law regarding marriage between the orders. It is understood that the *Lex Julia* contained at least thirty-five chapters, although no copy exists today.[150] Thanks to the great imperial biographer, Suetonius (c. 69-130 C.E.), we have a record of public reaction to the law.

> Some laws he abrogated, and he made some new ones; such as the sumptuary law, that relating to adultery and the violation of chastity, the law against bribery in elections, and likewise that for the encouragement of marriage. Having been more severe in his reform of this law than the rest, he found the people utterly averse to submit to it, unless the penalties were abolished or mitigated, besides allowing an interval of three years after a wife's death, and increasing the premiums on marriage. The equestrian order clamoured loudly, at a spectacle in the theatre, for its total repeal; whereupon he sent for the children of Germanicus, and shewed them partly sitting upon his own lap, and partly on their father's; intimating by his looks and gestures, that they ought not to think it a grievance to follow the example of that young man. But finding that the force of the law was eluded, by marrying girls under the age of puberty, and by frequent change of wives, he limited the time for consummation after espousals, and imposed restrictions on divorce.[151]

As the original version was met with utter noncompliance by the targeted classes, a more relaxed version of the law was instated a generation later in 9 C.E. in the *Lex Papia Poppaea*, this time sponsored by the consuls Papius and Poppaeus[152] who, as Cassius Dio (c. 155 – 229 C.E.) wittingly notes, were bachelors themselves:

> Now it chanced that both of them were not only childless but were not even married, and from this very circumstance the need of the law was apparent.[153]

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[150] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 61.

[151] Suetonius, *Augustus* 34 from *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, to which are added his Lives of the Grammarians, Rhetoricians, and Poets*, trans. Alexander Thomson, rev. T. Forester (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909).

[152] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 60.

[153] Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.10.3, trans. Earnest Cary (Carmbridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

Unfortunately, written copies of the *Lex Papia Poppaea* are also no longer extant, and direct quotations of either legislation are rare. Thus, our understanding of the differences between the first and second bouts of legislations is muddled, and is further complicated by the fact that the law from 9 C.E. and onwards is normally cited as the Julian and Papian law, *lex Julia et Papia*, making it nearly impossible to distinguish which pieces were elements of the original Julian Law, and which of the subsequent Papian Poppaen Law.[154]

From indirect sources we have gathered a handful of information on specific statutes within the legislation. Firstly, as the title *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* suggests, the law sanctioned marriages only between approved classes. Specifically, the law forbade intermarriage of senators, their children, and their descendents in the male line with freed persons, actors, and actors' children.[155] All equestrians and senators were expected to marry within their class.[156] Additionally,

> Free-born men are forbidden to marry [a woman who earns her living as a prostitute], a procuress, a woman manumitted by a procurer or procuress, a woman taken in adultery, a woman condemned in a public court, and any woman who has formerly practiced the stage profession.[157]

Adherence to this decree would have ideally furnished a pure-blood line of nobility. Given the ban on marriage to progeny of actors,[158] it is interesting to note that non-senator members of senatorial families *were* allowed to marry the children of freed

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[154] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 60 (referencing the *Digest* 23.3.44).

[155] *Ibid.*, 61.

[156] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 86.

[157] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 62.

[158] Acting was considered a morally degenerate profession. "Actors and actresses were regarded as no better than prostitutes…and a similar assumption was made about barmaids and waitresses" (Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 32).

persons, and even "sufficiently distinguished persons" of slave descent.[159] According to Cassius Dio,

> And since among the nobility there were far more males than females, he allowed all who wished, except the senators, to marry freedwomen, and ordered that their offspring should be held legitimate.[160]

Augustus also penalized adultery, hearkening back to the morality of Rome's past and instigating a safety measure to ensure that all children born to elite classes were truly elite. As paternity was difficult to prove, it was women who bore the brunt of such legislation, who were expected to remain chaste and loyal.[161] While husbands who tolerated their wives' adultery were also guilty,[162] Augustus demonstrated the severity of female licentiousness in the punishment of his own relatives.

> Though the Divine Augustus in his public life enjoyed unshaken prosperity, he was unfortunate at home from the profligacy of his daughter and granddaughter, both of whom he banished from Rome….Decimus Silanus, the paramour of the granddaughter of Augustus, though the only severity he experienced was exclusion from the emperor's friendship, saw clearly that it meant exile.[163]

The harsh punishments of his own daughter and granddaughter for their alleged sexual promiscuities, compared to those of the male accomplices, convey the imbalanced culpability assigned to women by the laws.

Within the acceptable legal unions, Augustus laid out a system of punishments and rewards in order to keep as many women as possible married and bearing children.

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[159] Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 62 (referencing *Tituli Ulpani* 13.2).

[160] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 54.16.2.

[161] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 72.

[162] *Ibid*., 86.

[163] Tacitus, *The Annals* 3.24 from *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church (New York: Random House, 1942).

Those who remained unmarried and childless, the *caelibes* and *orbi*,[164] were limited in their ability to inherit or pass on wealth and property, a primary privilege of Roman citizenship. For women, these penalties began at age twenty (including widows who had not remarried within a year – later two years – and divorcees not remarried within six months – later eighteen months),[165] for men at twenty-five.[166] Yet, social and legal sanctions permitted men to escape these penalties much more easily than women; a man betrothed to a girl twelve or younger could enjoy the political and economic advantages of marriage, while a woman was prohibited from being betrothed to a prepubescent boy.[167] In fact, Cassius Dio records that men were taking advantage of this loophole to such an extreme that Augustus had to make an amendment to the law:

> Inasmuch, too, as certain men were betrothing themselves to infant girls and thus enjoying the privileges granted to married men, but without rendering the service expected of them, he ordered that no betrothal should be valid if the man did not marry within two years of such betrothal,— that is, that the girl must in every case be at least ten years old at her betrothal if the man was to derive any advantages from it, since, as I have stated, girls are held to have reached the marriageable age on the completion of twelve full years.[168]

Unlike modern social and religious taboos which still dissuade terminating a couple's union, divorce was not explicitly frowned upon in the time of Augustus, provided that subsequent spouses were chosen from the same social class. However, failure to remarry was necessarily punished, as women would be wasting their precious childbearing years.[169]

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[164] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 84.
[165] Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 77.
[166] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,* 166.
[167] *Ibid.*
[168] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 54.16.7.
[169] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,* 166.

Free-born citizen parents who did uphold the Augustan legislation and bore three or more children earned the honored *ius liberorum*, the right of children, which offered fathers advantageous timing of candidacy for office and financial and legal autonomy for mothers.[170] A freedwoman, too, could earn the *ius liberorum* by bearing four children.[171] However, only children born to a freedwoman after her manumission counted toward her total, making it nearly impossibly for freedwomen to achieve the *ius liberorum*.[172] It is also important to clarify that only living children, or sons who had died in war, counted in this number. Given the high rate of infant and child mortality, women would probably have had to birth more than three (or four) babies in order to meet the requirement and gain the reward.[173] For a woman who did provide the requisite number of children, her autonomy "consisted of freedom from the provisions of the *l. Voconia* limiting female inheritance and dispensation from *tutela*."[174] Thus, a woman who proved herself a responsible Roman citizen by birthing more Roman citizens earned respect from the state in the form of daily autonomous decision-making. For those who bore fewer than three children, the state of motherhood itself was enough to confer some privileges under Augustan legislation, so that "a widow with one child was able to accept a testamentary inheritance from her husband and was not obliged to remarry in order to retain this fairly basic status. She was also capable of accepting

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[170] Dixon, *The Roman Mother,* 72.
[171] Rawson, "The Roman Family," 19.
[172] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 89.
[173] Brunt, *Italian Manpower*, 563.
[174] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 89.

legacies from friends."[175] The majority of privileges, however, fell upon those who bore three or more children.

Although we have evidence that some women were in fact able to circumvent the onerous laws of guardianship and inheritance even before Augustus' accession,[176] the benefit of having *ius liberorum* in title alone cannot be ignored. Verbal honors and identifications were ubiquitously prized in Roman culture, as we can see from the great significance of belonging to a certain class, or in the new names emperors adopted in order to convey their status – such as the name Augustus, "worthy of honor," by which the first emperor became known, and which subsequent emperors added to their own names. In fact, when Augustus established his marital laws, "he granted [the *ius liberorum*] *ex officio* to all of the Vestals, so that no ordinary woman could claim rights in excess of these prestigious priestesses."[177] The value of the *ius liberorum* for the Vestals, then, lay purely in the title as those women had always enjoyed financial autonomy and exemption from the *lex Vaconia*.[178]

Bestowing honor upon them, Augustus simultaneously used the Vestal Virgins as another tool to help stimulate the birthrate. Vestals were traditionally recruited from the upper classes, whose families tended to be small, hence the push to increase procreation. Since the families were already small, giving over a daughter to the service of the state for the majority of her fruitful years would have been a tremendous sacrifice

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[175] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 88 (referencing *Tituli Ulpani* 14-18).

[176] "For women of full age transact their own affairs, but in certain cases, as a mere form, the guardian interposes his authority, and he is often compelled to give it by the Praetor, though he may be unwilling to do so." Gaius 1.190, *The Civil Law Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo*, trans. S.P. Scott (Cincinnati: The Central Trust Company, 1932).

[177] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*,

[178] *Ibid*, 90.

for a Roman family as "a daughter might make the difference between the survival or extinction of a family line."[179] Apparently, the advantage of keeping a daughter out of the cult of Vesta outweighed the benefit of not having to provide a dowry. Therefore, Augustus, as an incentive to increase the birth rate among the upper classes, exempted families who had borne three children from offering up their daughters to serve as guardians of the sacred hearth.[180]

The encouragement of marriage and family was a comprehensive campaign of Augustus', comprising the aforementioned Julian and Papian Law, as well as the official patronage of Venus Genetrix and the erection of public artwork. Venus Genetrix, Venus the begetter, was said by Julius Caesar to have founded the Julian line. As Augustus belonged to the Julian family by adoption, he instated this maternal deity as an icon of fertility and parenthood.[181] Her temple stood in the Julian Forum, directly adjacent to Augustus' own forum. The use of statue and sculpture to promote Roman ideals was hardly novel, and Augustus held true to traditional Roman practice by restoring the statue of Cornelia *mater Gracchorum*, mother of the famous Gracchi brothers of the Roman Republic and embodiment of ideal maternity.[182] Additionally, the *Ara Pacis*, altar of Augustan peace dedicated to Augustus by the senate in 9 B.C.E. in honor of his military successes, bears a panel portraying an inconclusively identified goddess.[183] Whether she represents mother Italia, life-giving Terra Mater (Mother Earth), or Pax (Peace), she is surrounded by images of fertility and prosperity and holds twins on her lap, each

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[179] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,* 214.
[180] *Ibid.*
[181] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 72.
[182] *Ibid*., 71.
[183] *Ibid*., 72 and Plate 1.

clamoring for a breast. There can be no misunderstanding Augustus' actions to make motherhood and procreation appear as wholesome and desirable as possible.

Various historical accounts show Augustus personally advocating for parenthood among his citizens. According to Suetonius, Augustus attended the games in the imperial box, surrounded by his great-grandchildren as an example of the Roman family ideal to the populace.[184] In a public speech recorded by Cassius Dio, Augustus reproached the recalcitrant equestrian bachelors and praised the married men among them who fulfilled their duties as responsible citizens:

> Though you are but few altogether, in comparison with the vast throng that inhabits this city, and are far less numerous than the others, who are unwilling to perform any of their duties, yet for this very reason I for my part praise you the more, and am heartily grateful to you because you have shown yourselves obedient and are helping to replenish the fatherland….You have done right, therefore, to imitate the gods and right to emulate your fathers, so that, just as they begot you, you also may bring others into the world….For is there anything better than a wife who is chaste, domestic, a good house-keeper, a rearer of children; one to gladden you in health, to tend you in sickness; to be your partner in good fortune, to console you in misfortune; to restrain the mad passion of youth and to temper the unseasonable harshness of old age? And is it not a delight to acknowledge a child who shows the endowments of both parents, to nurture and educate it, at once the physical and the spiritual image of yourself, so that in its growth another self lives again?[185]

He extols the virtues of the ever-selfless wife, speaking of her as a commodity through whom the continuation of one's life and the repopulation of the community are achieved. Further, he was reputedly fond of quoting speeches from Rome's earlier days to show that marriage had always been a respected and civic duty.[186] One such aphorism by the censor Metellus (102 B.C.E.) reads,

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[184] Suetonius, *Augustus*, 34. See quote on page 54.

[185] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 56.2-3.

[186] Brunt, *Italian Manpower*, 559.

> If we could get on without a wife, Romans, we would all avoid that annoyance; but since nature has ordained that we can neither live very comfortably with them nor at all without them, we must take thought for our last well-being rather than for the pleasure of the moment.[187]

Again, wives were considered a means to an end, and were assumed to embody the quintessential Roman values as did men.

Given the value of such incentives as laid out in the marriage laws, and the onerous consequences of not adhering to them, one can only imagine the pressure experienced by Roman parents as they navigated their way through the muddy waters of practicality, personal choice, and social and political expectations. Whatever their final justifications, evidence shows that Roman parents ultimately did not heed the decrees and the birthrate increased little, if at all, under Augustus. Ancient authors offer anecdotes which may help elucidate some of the hesitation to obey the emperor. Suetonius wrote of Hortalus, a member of a distinguished family who jeopardized his financial security because he had four children "in patriotic response to Augustus' call to procreate."[188]

> [Tiberius] having relieved the poverty of a few senators, to avoid further demands, he declared that he should for the future assist none, but those who gave the senate full satisfaction as to the cause of their necessity. Upon this, most of the needy senators, from modesty and shame, declined troubling him. Amongst these was Hortalus, grandson to the celebrated orator Quintus Hortensius, who [marrying], by the persuasion of Augustus, had brought up four children upon a very small estate.[189]

Pliny the Younger (61 – 112 C.E.), in a letter to a friend, wrote admiringly about a man named Asinius Rufus whom he considered a model citizen.

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[187] Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 1.6.2, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).
[188] Dixon, *The Roman Mother,* 23.
[189] Suetonius, *Tiberius* from *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 34.

> He has several children, for here too he has done his duty as a good citizen, and has chosen to enjoy the blessing of a fruitful marriage [lit. wife] at a time when the advantages of remaining childless make most people feel a single child a burden. Such advantages he has scorned, and has in fact sought the title of grandfather.[190]

The advantages of childlessness are unfortunately not explicitly listed, although we may surmise that, like today, raising children is frequently a source of anxiety and financial burden. Women, too, would have borne their own singular concerns about pregnancy and child-rearing, whether for reasons of vanity or health. Maternal mortality during childbirth was no small matter and husbands and wives would have been equally anxious about the risks involved. This is the underbelly of the Augustan legislation – an exacerbation of existing tensions about reproductive choice via an effort to legally enforce that which always had been a personal decision for the couple, or in some cases, for the woman acting independently of her husband.

Augustus' legislation was radical for it represented the most vigorous attempt by the state up until that point to control sexuality and the family. Let us consider the different reactions couples may have exhibited in response to the laws, and the reproductive options with which a Roman woman was thus faced. Perhaps she and her husband agreed to provide three children for Rome. As noted above, this did cause financial and social strain within families, and sometimes the efforts did not yield success; examples of women with the requisite number of children who had not claimed the *ius liberorum* have been uncovered.[191] Some women may not have desired financial autonomy from their *paterfamiliae* or *tutores,* content with providing for the Roman race and adhering to traditional gender responsibilities. Others may have been barred from

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[190] Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 4.15, trans. Betty Radice (Cambrdige: Harvard University Press, 1969).
[191] Dixon references the work of P.J. Sijpesteijn (1965) in *The Roman Mother*, 90.

claiming the *ius* by their respective guardians, even as the husbands were able to claim their rewards.

Consider next the woman who did not care to fulfill Augustus' plan while her husband craved the rewards. A trip to the midwife for contraceptives or abortifacients may or may not have proven useful, depending on how strongly the midwife aligned herself with the theories and biases of Greek doctors, not to mention the efficacy of the given drugs. How about the woman who yearned for financial freedom, willing to procreate until she birthed three children who survived, while the husband cared not to obtain the benefits in order to limit his wife's freedoms? Surely she couldn't force herself upon her husband, and one can imagine her subsequently submitting to a life of oppression.

Finally, there were the widows and divorcees who were faced with the choice to remarry or stay faithful to their deceased husbands. Augustus significantly complicated matters in this area. For while he represented himself as reviving traditional Roman morals and cultivating a new stock of wholesome, conventional Romans, his push to keep childbearing women reproducing as often as possible was in direct opposition to the Roman ideal of the *univera*, the woman who remained faithful to one husband during her lifetime.[192] Provocatively, Augustus encouraged widows and divorcees to remarry, while simultaneously refurbishing the statue of Cornelia *mater Gracchorum*, largely praised for her undying faithfulness to her deceased husband.[193] Throughout his reign, Augustus created a dynamic whereby choosing fidelity meant opposing the emperor,

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[192] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 22.
[193] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 161.

while remarrying showed a disconnect from and disrespect for deep-seated Roman values.

To be sure, Roman women were continually confronted with a barrage of conflicting and unachievable expectations long before Augustus came to power. From the contrast between the ideal spinning and weaving *matrona* and the actual villa-overseeing *matrona*, between the ideal of fertility and the value of virginity, between seeking female medical advice from male doctors and their midwife protégés, Augustus' mandates only worsened existing tensions and pressures, making the exciting birth of a new empire rather disagreeable for its women. Nor did Augustan legislation fall out of favor with his death in 19 C.E., for "change was very gradual in Roman law, particularly family law. We sometimes find in Christian legislation the first formal acknowledgement of practices attested by authors of the first and second centuries B.C."[194] Thus we know of schemes in Nero's time (54 – 68 C.E) to encourage the poor to raise children they might otherwise have exposed, Trajan's (98 – 117 C.E.) campaign to provide financial support so poor families could feed their children, and letters by Pliny the Younger which reference imperial attempts to encourage members of the elite to spread Trajan's mission across Italy.[195] These imperial activities point to the perceived ongoing problem of low birth rate, indicating that reproductive legislation was not finding much success among Romans; they also convey a general desire to boost the entire Roman population, not merely the elite. Emperor Domitian (81 – 96 C.E.) reinforced Augustan legislation as part of his campaign to erase what he perceived as female degeneracy. In addition to the

[194] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 44.
[195] *Ibid*., 87.

laws he restored the shrine of Plebian Chastity and made public examples of the Vestal Virgins by holding capital trials of Vestals and their lovers,[196] for, as Pliny wrote,

> He had made up his mind to bury alive Cornelia, the chief priestess of the Vestal Virgins, with the idea of making his age famous by an example of this kind.[197]

We also have evidence of Hadrianic (117 – 138 C.E.) amendments to the original Augustan laws, permitting women who had earned the *ius liberorum* and freedom from *tutela* to make a will by the same procedure as a man.[198]

It is truly a paradox that at the height of Roman military achievement in the western world the status of women, if anything, became even more narrowly defined. As Roman influence spread into Greece, oppressive Greek medical theory and practitioners entered society. As the Republic made way for a restructured empire its leader Augustus, the *pater patriae*, mandated procreation. Together with socially enforced gender roles, these compounding pressures left women as agents of reproduction, prized mainly for their fertility. It is entirely fitting that we gathered these impressions directly from our reading of source material authored by men. Yet how much more might we understand the experience of Roman women had they been permitted to express themselves and empowered to create a written record of their own for posterity.

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[196] Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 212.
[197] Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 4.11.
[198] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 88.

Chapter V: Conclusion

In this account I have attempted to explore the intersection between social forces, medical practice, and law within Roman society, from the late Republic to the early Empire, and the way in which these factors contributed to the limited autonomy allotted to women with regard to reproductive choice. As we have seen, the status of a Roman woman was inextricably linked to her sexuality. Whether a virgin or deflowered; single, married, divorced, or widowed; fertile or barren; adulteress or faithful, a woman's value essentially lay in her reproductive organs and how she used them. It was unclear, however, in which of the above roles a woman would find herself most valued. For there were inherent contradictions within society surrounding the ideal woman, including a reverence for Vestal Virgins on the one hand and actively procreating wives on the other, not to mention the irreconcilable tension between a noble widow's remaining faithful to her deceased husband versus the pull to remarry in order to continue bearing children for Rome. Given the myriad conflicts and pressures with which women were confronted regarding their sexuality, it is clear that they did not have full control over their own bodies and reproductive choices. Compounding this, Roman law during this time frame restricted a woman's liberty of self. Every member of this 'weaker' sex was relegated to be under the official guardianship of a man for her entire life. By law, she was unable to make legal and financial decisions without his approval. Ironically, it was not until Augustus' marriage legislation that a woman was (officially) able to earn financial freedom – but only by using her body productively by bearing at least three (or four) children to ensure a robust empire.

As I showed in Chapter III, traditional Roman folk medicine allowed a space for female agency. The system of folk midwives attending to pregnant and laboring mothers was perhaps the only situation in which women counseled and cared for each other in such an important capacity, without the intrusion of a man. With the Hellenization of Rome, however, arrived a new system of medicine, one explicitly dictated by men. Gynecology was now a subset of a broader field of medicine, a field under full male jurisdiction and subject to Greek medical theory. Consequently, men began to practice women's healthcare and publish medical texts on the proper care of womanly concerns – from a distinctly male perspective which, as I demonstrated throughout this paper, routinely ignored the needs and desires of women. Some of these doctors also published guides for midwives on proper gynecological practice. The Greek doctor Soranus and his comprehensive work *Gynecology* is our most important piece of evidence for the androcentric care offered to Roman women by doctors and doctor-trained midwives. Such care as laid out in *Gynecology* was antithetical to traditional female folk medicine and added to and epitomized the increasing loss of control women had over their own bodies.

Finally, I focused in on the era of Augustus, during which women faced even more external pressures concerning their reproductivity. Augustus' Julian and Papian law represented an invasion of the feminine sphere by mandating marriage and procreation and punishing the uncooperative (including, we may assume, citizens physiologically unable to comply with the law). At the crossroads of gender biases, sexist medical theory, and this new provocative legislation, stood women at the mercy of Rome's intrusive, conflicting expectations. The elite Roman female possessed little opportunity

to assert control over her own body without submitting to disrespect, criticism, and even punishment.

It is important to reiterate that this account has not dealt with women of the lower classes, including freedwomen and slaves. Unfortunately we simply do not possess adequate evidence from which to draw founded conclusions about their communities. In several ways, however, it is safe to assume that these women inhabited quite a different subculture from that of the elite. Most notably, they probably did not have the financial means to hire doctors nor professional midwives. This would have excluded them from the direct male-centric biases characteristic of the clinical treatment of elite women, and perhaps may have allowed greater leniency over their own reproductive choices. Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter IV, it is not clear how heavily the Augustan legislation was geared toward non-upper class families, nor the extent to which women of the lower classes may have experienced state-induced pressure to procreate.

In crafting this analysis on the pressures women faced centuries ago, it was quite challenging to suppress a modern-day bias. When discussing restrictions and burdens to women and their freedoms, it is tempting to slip into judgments about patriarchal Roman society and the men who dominated it; but it would be unfair to assume that Roman men were intentionally misogynistic. Some men of ancient Rome were surely chauvinists, as some men of the twenty-first century can indeed be, but it would be unreasonable to assume that our contemporary social theories and understanding of gender relations mirrored those of antiquity. To that end, I have had to refrain from referring to a woman's 'right' to her own body, as this is a modern liberal value. A

woman did not have many rights, as I have shown, and claim to her own body was not legally afforded to her. Nevertheless, we cannot discount a woman's experience and perception of her personal control, as these are valid ways of understanding the status of women in ancient Rome. For example, while non-adulterous rape was not an illegal act, we may still reflect on the position in which this placed the female victim, and the dubious power she possessed to control the situation by procuring abortives. It is through my attempts to view Roman history through a non-judgmental lens that I have striven to portray the experience of Roman women and the numerous ways in which conflicting and oppressive tensions pertaining to sexuality and reproduction were essential to her identity and to her quality of life.

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