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Introduction

Your maidenhead is not all your own; partly it belongs to your parents, a third part is given to your father, a third part is given to your mother, only a third is yours: do not contend with two, who have given their rights to their son-in-law together with the dowery. (Catullus poems 62:60–65 in Goold (1913))

The lines quoted are the five last lines of poem 62, written by the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus (born 87/84 BC, Verona). Poem 62 is often referred to as a wedding hymn, and it enlightens the reader on the potential proceedings of a roman wedding. Furthermore, and possibly more interesting for this article’s discussion, it gives insight into the attitudes towards young women. Namely that value was put on their virginity and ability to produce children, and that these social expectations deprived them of agency over their own bodies.

In this article I will explore the consequences young women faced due to Greek and Roman social gender norms, with particular attention to whether it led to increased infant- and maternal mortality rate. Discussions on women’s agency over their own body is unfortunately still highly relevant in a contemporary context. That notwithstanding, the discussion here will focus on this issue in a historical rather than a contemporary context.

The focus of the article will be on two case studies, Well G5:3 and ERC110. Well G5:3 is located in the Athenian Agora. While it was in use for a long time, the deposit of infant bones that will be discussed have been dated, through typology of the surrounding material, to the late Hellenistic period, more specifically 165–150 BC. ERC110 was found in Pompeii, and is the remains of a young pregnant woman, who died in the pyroclastic surge of Vesuvius in 79 AD. The case studies illustrate the reality of the high infant- and maternal mortality rates of the ancient world. This article will further discuss these case studies in the light of ancient literary sources and argue that the social gender norms presented in said sources eventuated in increased infant- and maternal mortality.

‘Women’ is not a singular entity, and while some significant bodily experiences are shared socioeconomic class is a factor when it comes any studies of lived experiences. One of the case studies, the remains of ERC110, is that of a sixteen-year-old. The expectations of early marriages were likely more rigid for upper-class
women than that of the ‘average’, working-class woman. Still, using ERC110 as an example will illustrate a societal problem that affected all young women. It is also worth noting that regional differences exist. Places outside Athens, Pompeii and Rome had to a varying degree different ways of approaching both reproduction and female agency. The Romans built many of their ideas from the Athenian model and are to some extent similar. This article will focus on Hellenistic Athens, and Pompeii during the early Roman Empire (200 BC–100 AD). The article will have some literary examples outside this timeframe. This is to illustrate the continuity of the social gender norms. The views of women presented in the article was not new to Hellenistic Athens, and survived long past the Roman Empire.

Part of a collective

The tagline of the 2015 paperback edition of Sarah B. Pomeroy’s book *Goddesses, Whores, Wife’s & Slaves* reads «For centuries, half the ancient world remained invisible» An inaccurate, and perhaps slightly exaggerated statement that expresses the feeling of injustice and frustration that have driven many to feminist studies. It is tempting to study the women of the past by themselves, to give them the room they deserve. However, they did not exist in a bubble, void of men. It is important to see women as a part of a larger structure, affected by and affecting their surroundings. The relationship between women and the patriarchy have especially been of interest for feminist studies. As Gilchrist (1999:2) puts it, «power relations which structures the subordination of women, through institutions such as the family, education, religion and government». The institution of the family will be the focus of this article.

Traditional interpretations of ancient Athenian and Roman gender norms supports Gilchrist’s description. Women were understood to belong solely in the private sphere, while men enjoyed the freedom of the public sphere. This view is likely in part due to the male bias of ancient sources, as most surviving sources were created by men. However, gender norms were more likely a scale rather than a strict divide (Wallace-Hadrill 1988:58–59). Some women partook in the public sphere (Blok 2017:208); however, these societies were not designed to make that an easy feat, and the social structure favored men. Women’s role in the nuclear family, and the most important role she would fill in her life was that of the mother (Blundell 1998:42–42). To ensure the creation of legitimate heirs, and the survival of gaps in agnatic line of succession moral and legal costumes were put in place (Case 1985:319), despite it taking away reproductive agency from women.

In Ancient Athens the family structure was the *Oikos*. It included, but were not limited to, the house and other properties connected to the household. The term also encompasses economy connected to said household, and its family members (MacDowell 1989; Demand 1994:2; Osborne 2017:148–149). The oikos was patrilineal, and to ensure its survival over a gap in the agnatic line of succession, a daughter would become heiress. She would become ‘attached’ to the oikos until she married and bore a son who would inherit it. By law, the heiress was to marry a male relative on her father’s side, usually her uncle or his son (Demand 1994:3–4; Blundell 1998:40). Even if she was already married, she was still subject to this law. In the fourth century BC, Isaeus remarked regarding this law that «many men who have already been living with their wives [were] deprived of them [in that manner]» (Isaeus 3.64. G in Lefkowitz and Fant (2016:80)). Women had no agency under this law. She was used for her reproductive capabilities as a commodity.

Daughters would not have been commodities just in the case of this law but were used to build the families socioeconomic standing, and a major incentive for marring of daughters’ at a young age was economical. It was believed that girls and young women were naturally wild beings, prone to outbursts: excessive, uncontrolled behavior as well as an overall lack of sexual self-control. The men would therefore have felt it necessary to keep a careful eye on their female relatives
Margarethe Bieber (1961:9) states «attic morality banished women from public life». Even putting herself in situations of temptation could bring dishonor and shame on her oikos (Demand 1994:147). This was likely a reason to marry her off younger.

The belief that women were naturally weaker were also held by the Romans. The family structure of the Roman empire was the familia, that would have encompassed everyone subject to the authority of the Paterfamilias, the oldest living male of the family. The familia included his wife, children; both biological and adopted, as well as anyone in the male line, such as grandsons (Kamm and Graham 2015:148). Due to the belief and fear of outbursts of girls and young women, they were given a guardian. After marriage, it was her husband who became her guardian (Blundell 1998:16). The guardianship removed agency from many aspects of women’s lives.

Emperor Augustus used the possibility lifting the guardianship as a trade to further his political wishes. The birth rate was rapidly decreasing during the time Emperor Augustus held the power of Rome (27 BC–14 AD). Consequently, there were fewer young men available for military service (Wallace-Hadrill 1981:59–61). Augustus painted women who had many children as signs of health. They did their civic duty to the state, and represented everything strong and good about the traditional morality that gave them the empire (Sebesta 1997:529–530). To encourage a cultural and moral renewal of society, and the hope of increasing the birthrate incentives were introduced. Freeborn women who had three or more children were removed from their guardianships (Kamm and Graham 2015:153). Furthermore, punishments were given to couples that did not produce offspring (Wallace-Hadrill 1981:59). It is not easy to change the structure of a society. Change in any structure relies on the people having both the ability of reflexive action, and the power to change (Kahlert 2012:61). Emperor Augustus had both. He used his historical knowledge and understanding of how his empire worked in order to modify it, to better fit his political agenda. To achieve this, he used something the women population lacked: economic and social freedom. While fulfilling his political agenda, Emperor Augustus was still able to keep women controlled under the established social norms of society. Even though he gave women more independence the success of he’s political agenda was still built on the taking away their reproductive agency.

Gynecology

The social norm was early marriages for women. One of the reasons for this were likely from fear for the daughter’s well-being, due to the lack of knowledge of the female anatomy. There is a lot to learn from ancient medicine; As Lesley Dean-Jones (1994:2) notes that «... the mistaken conclusions [ancient medical writers] arrive at in spite of their genuine attempts at empirical observations and rationality can be very revealing of societal assumptions about women's bodies [...]». There was a difference in how the Hippocratic authors approached their male patients and their female patients. For males all the humors were often the basis for both the diagnosis and the treatment plan (Demand 1994:74). Women on the other hand were mostly affected only by one of the humors, blood. The humor of blood was regulated by the uterus (King 2001:69). This is stated very clearly by the Hippocratic author of Places in Man:

Diseases of women, as they are called. The uterus is the cause of all these diseases; for however it changes from its normal position—whether it moves forward, or whether it withdraws—it produces diseases. (Hippocrates Places in Man, in Potter (1995:47)).

The uterus therefore played a central role in women’s care (Dean-Jones 1994:225), and most ailments seem to stem from blood passing or not passing normally into the uterus (Dean-Jones 1994:59), or the uterus being displeased of its conditions. If the uterus was too dry it would go in search of moisture and attached itself to other organs, which resulted in wondering womb syndrome, hysteria. Such ailments were
considered a consequence of prolonged sexual abstinence by Hippocratic authors. Naturally spinsters and widowed women were more often affected, but it could occur suddenly in any woman. The best treatment was a timely and fruitful marriage which would result in normal menstruation, proper moistening of the uterine tissue, a cervix of the right size, as well as the uterus staying in its correct position. Women would often be advised to become pregnant, as the conception of a viable fetus was considered a natural and positive remedy (Sissa 1990:45). Viewed this way even by nature women did not have reproductive agency. They were completely at mercy of their anatomy, and the whims of the uterus.

The curiosity towards the human anatomy, and sexual differentiation became the beginning of the study of medicine (Dean-Jones 1994:5). The Hippocratic corpus include a wide variety of medical topics and content. Out of the around sixty Hippocratic treaties, ten are gynecological in nature (Dean-Jones 1994:13). The treaties date mostly to the late fifth and early fourth century BC but were likely collected in Alexandria around the third or second century BC (Dean-Jones 1994:6). The Hippocratic corpus was written by many different medical experts that were not all contemporary of one another. Consequently, the treaties differ quite a bit in opinion. In some cases, it outright contradicts or challenges itself (Dean-Jones 1994:6; Kalachanis and Michailidis 2015:1).

There is however a high level of agreement when it comes to the gynecological treaties (King 2001:21). Sissa (1990:44) theorizes that the interest in female anatomy, physiology and pathology derives from society’s focus on women’s purpose of reproduction and the value of procreation, more than a genuine concern for female health. A fertile woman was considered a healthy one; fertility and health was synonymous when it came to women. Further, infertility would be treated as a female issue, despite a knowledge that «The cause of a man and wife’s failure to generate when they have intercourse with each other lies sometimes in both, sometimes only in one or the other». (Aristotle. History of Animals, Book 10 in Balme (1991)).

The Agora Bone Well

Well G5:3, also known as the Agora Bone Well was excavated by Dorothy Burr Thompson in June 1938. In her field diary she only briefly comments on the bones found in the well, adding that J. Lawrence Angle noted that many of the bones where human while he examined them on the 22nd of June (Liston et al. 2018:v). Later, in 1945, when presenting the skeletal material from the American excavations of the Athenian Agora Angle describes the well finds as « [...] bones of about 175 infants of which the overwhelming majority are newborn or full term foetuses, together with several older infants» (Angle 1945:310). However, in 1995 it was discovered that sorting the skeletal material was never finished. A recount the following year resulted in the number of infant-remains drastically increased: from 175 to 449 individuals (Little 1999:284).

The well was likely constructed in the classical period. It is located at the western boundary of the Athenian Agora and was meant to provide for the artisans’ workshops close by. When these shops were abandoned in the second century AD, so was Well G5:3 (Liston and Rotroff 2013:63–66). After it stopped being in use, the well gained a new purpose, during the mid-second century BC, as a convenient place to discard of waste for workshops, and as a domestic dump site. Fragments of tools associated with the close by industrial area, bronze scraps and, bones from domesticated sheep, goats, cows and pigs, as well as fish was excavated at a depth of 16 meters to 18 meters (Snyder 1999:284; Liston and Rotroff 2013:64–66). Among the domestic fill are bowls with characteristics that reflect being made in 170 to 160 BC. The well deposit was made over time, but no more than 15 years, likely from 165 to 150 BC (Liston et al. 2018:8).

The American team dug in total 21.45 meters down, reaching the water table at 11 meters. The infant remains were excavated between 14.70
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meters to 20.50 meters, mixed with mostly domestic waste. 80 percent of the household pottery found in the well can be associated with childbirth. Basins, large bowls and kraters have gone into the well whole, and not broken as would be expected. The basins were likely intended to clean the newborn child, but when it died the basins could have been used to carry the dead to be discarded in the well (Liston and Rotroff 2013:65.67).

It is not possible to know the actual extent of infant mortality in antiquity. It has been estimated that the Roman empire had an infant mortality rate as high as 300 per 1000. Furthermore, surviving past the infant stage did not equal likelihood of growing into adulthood. An estimated 45 percent of children died before age five (Parkin 2013:47).

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius writes in his *Meditations*, in the middle of the second century AD, that death is a more vivid reality when looking at children, referring to them as «little souls bearing up corpses» (Marcus Aurelius Meditations 9.24; 4.41 in Haines (1916)). The description is one he uses multiple times, quoted from Epictetus. Marcus Aurelius and his wife personally knew the hard reality of the high child mortality rate. They had thirteen or fourteen children, only one of which, their son Commodus, lived until adulthood (Parkin 2013:40). In a later chapter of *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius quotes Epictetus one more time:

A man while fondly kissing his child, says Epictetus, should whisper in his heart: ‘Tomorrow peradventure thou wilt die.’ Ill-omened words these! Nay, said he, nothing is ill-omened that signifies a natural process. Or it is ill-omened also to talk of ears of corn being reaped. (Marcus Aurelius Meditations 11.34 in Haines (1916)).

Regardless of the estimated percentage of child mortality being correct or not, the reality was that many died. Marcus Aurelius illustrates through his quote that despite it being sad, the death of a child was at least, by some, considered a natural process, a part of life to be endured.

Fagfellevurdert artikkel

The infant mortality rate was high, and of the infants in well G5:3 40 percent died of natural causes, 15 percent due to complications with prematurity. The prenatal stage is from twenty-eight weeks in utero to the first week of life. Most of the infants in the well died as full-term infants. Their ages range from twenty-six weeks in utero to six months old (Little 1999:284; Liston and Rotroff 2013:69), some likely being stillborn, others dying of complications associated with the birth itself.

It is hard to estimate infant mortality in antiquity accurately. It is quite uncommon to find neonate and infant bones, due to their fragile nature. Until the infant cemetery at Kylindra on the island of Astypalaia was excavated in 1992, Well G5:3 was the largest known infant burial site (Hillson 2009:137–239). By 2013 2770 infants had been discovered, mostly in inhumation graves. The graves date from the geometric period until the Roman era. The site illustrates a continuity in attitudes towards infant mortality, and a possible anticipation of the arrival of a new family member, as they were given a proper burial (Dasen 2013:33).

Most of the infants were at the development stage expected at a full-term pregnancy (Hillson 2009:137–139) like the infants in Well G5:3. The neonates had been placed in a fetal position inside pots: on the side with their knees drawn up towards the chest, and their head positioned in the direction of the pots neck. The pots were further placed on their side, with the neck filled with a stone stopper or mortar. A cut was created on the side of the pots to place the infant inside. One theory is that the pots represent the womb, their burial being a ritualistic representation of birth. 10 percent of the infants have been placed the other way around, with their feet towards the pots neck. If these burials represent breech births, the percentage of such complications, at least at Astypalaia, is higher than the 2 to 5 percent breech births that the modern west experiences (Hillson 2009:142).
The fate of ERC110

Twelve individuals, six adults and six children, were in 1975 discovered inside a house in Pompeii. The individuals are presumably the owner of the house, a male in his sixties; his wife, a female in her sixties; their two children or grandchildren, a nine-year-old male and a sixteen-year-old female, that shared the same minor genetic spinal disorder; their son-in-law; and their servant. Furthermore, the sixteen-year-old was nine months pregnant at the time of her death. Inside her abdomen, the bones of a full-term fetus were found (Beard 2009:8).

Like infant mortality, it is not possible to know the extent of maternal deaths. The World Health Organization defines maternal deaths as:

>«@the annual number of female deaths from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes) during pregnancy and childbirth or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and site of the pregnancy" (Cresswell 2022).

Sue Blundell puts the maternal death for antiquity at one in five pregnancies (Blundell 1998:49). Regardless how close this is to reality, the sixteen-year-old, who’s remains have the code ERC110 would have been among the ones that did die of maternal complications. Her body was not done developing, and her pelvis would have been too narrow for her baby to pass through. If she had not died in the pyroclastic surge in 79 BC, she would have likely died of exhaustion or blood loss after days of labor with no possibility of birthing her child (Laurence 2005:89; Laskaris 2021:86).

ERC110 shared her fate with many others. Sue Blundell does not take age into account when estimating maternal deaths. If she did, she would likely find that more often it was young women who died. The maternal death rate today is also higher for young women under the age of seventeen than it is for older women (Demand 1994:102). A third century BC epitaph from Rome is dedicated to the four daughters of Aristodicus, who all died in childbirth. Pliny the younger also writes of a pair of sisters that died during childbirth, «in the flower of their youth» (Pliny the Younger Letters 4.21 in Radice (1969); Lefkowitz and Fant 2016:243).

In his Gynecology Soranus discusses Dicoles the Carysteans’s text On gynaecology, and states that first time mothers, and «young women have difficult labor, whereas those who have often borne have easy labor». He explains that one reason for difficult labor is the size of the fetus (Soranus’ Gynecology 4.1 in Temkin (1991)). This is in part an issue due to the young age of the expecting mothers. Girls were married around the time of or soon after the first menarche, the first menstruation, between the age of twelve to fourteen. Despite ovulation beginning, and menarche occurring, the young woman’s reproductive system is not fully matured. This means that for many, like ERC110, the pelvis is still underdeveloped. Issues that arise during pregnancy for young women not fully matured could permanently affect the woman’s childbearing capabilities (Demand 1994:102).

The survival of the agnatic line of succession was crucial for the survival of a strong patriarchy. It was important to have control over reproduction. Belief in the lack of sexual self-control of women was common (Sissa 1990:92). The ideal of a ‘respectable’ woman eventuated in the potential shame and dishonor for the family if the young women put herself in situations of temptations (Demand 1994:147). Virginity was a debated topic; it was considered healthy by some to stay a virgin as long as possible, while others strongly disagreed. One belief held by the Romans was that young women of marriable age, that were not yet married, would often experience trouble with menstruation. As the young woman was still a virgin her body had not been opened by sexual intercourse, this meant that the blood that travelled to the womb did not have a way to leave. The trapped blood would therefore travel to the heart. This created a pressure which resulted in numbness, delirium, fear and suicidal thoughts (Rouselle 1988:67). The fear of public shame and the young woman’s
health created a cultural need for early marriage (Harlow and Laurence 2005:56).

Arnold van Gennep introduces the term social puberty in his book *The rites of passage* first published in 1960. When discussing transitional rites into adulthood he makes a distinction between physiological puberty and social puberty. The physiological changes of puberty in females are the swelling of the breasts; the growth of the pelvis and pubic hair; and menarche, the first menstruation cycle. Social puberty is not defined by physiological puberty, either one could occur first. Arnold van Gennep uses two examples to illustrate this. Early 1900’s Paris and Rome: The first saw girls go through social puberty at sixteen, and the latter at twelve. In both cities, however the girls went through physiological puberty at around age fourteen. (Gennep 1960:65–67).

Boys in antiquity went through physiological puberty before social puberty and were given more time to mature (Harlow and Laurence 2005:65). However, at the first signs of physiological changes girls would be considered of marriable age (King 2001:23). This would happen around the first menarche for Athenian girls, and often before for the Roman elite that still practiced early marriages, despite this often happening before menarche (Harlow and Laurence 2005:56). The wife of the writer Xenophon of Athens was according to him «not yet fifteen» when they got married (Xenophon Oeconomicus 7.5 in Henderson (2013)). At that point she would have already gone through the rites that transitioned her from girl to woman (Beaumont 2012:170–175; 2013:199–217; Garland 2013:2010–2014).

In their early training to become good wives, young women imitated their mothers’ actions, so that they would be able to duplicate their social role later in life. Asymmetric learning, from mother to daughter was the natural way for a young woman to be trained. One aspect taught was moderation of intake of food and drink (Wolicki 2015:305–306). It was believed that girls and women needed less food than men. The preferential feeding of men eventuated in malnutrition in the female population (Demand 1994:72), essentially creating generational malnutrition.

Malnutrition during pregnancy affects the fetus. Girls that experience malnourishment through their mothers in the first two trimesters in utero will grow up to have less favorable outcomes and more difficult pregnancies themselves (Demand 1994:8). Miscarriages and perinatal mortality were a real concern, and not only for young women. Women therefore kept an eye out for any sign of impending miscarriages. E.g., bleeding, shrinking of the breasts, a cold feeling in the thighs or a heavy feeling in the small of their back (Rousselle 1988:47–48).

Critics to early marriage, and consequently early pregnancy, existed. Plato in his *Republic* writes «For a woman,’ I said, ‘she should start to produce children for the state in her twentieth year and go on to her fortieth’» in his *Laws* he later changes the ideal age to bear children from twenty to sixteen (Plato. Laws 6.785b in Bury (1926)) Hesiod advised that the women should have «reached puberty four years earlier, and in the fifth she should marry». Furthermore, Plato’s student Aristotle warned against early pregnancy specifically, arguing that «mating of the young is bad for child-bearing; [...] offspring of the young are more imperfect and likely to produce female children». He also comments on how among young women, maternal death was more common (Aristotle *Politics* 1335a:10–20 in Rackham). However, in general, Greek culture favored early marriages (Demand 1994:102).

**Changing a structure**

It was expected that the young woman was a virgin, and we can therefore assume that if she was not one, she would be harder to marry off, and would be worth less. The virginity is given together with the dowry, essentially making it a part of the economic deal that was marriage.

Women had little to no agency when it came to all aspects of her life in established cultural beliefs. Her body was at the mercy of nature. Her animalistic impulses were stronger than her
self-control. Even without other people, she had a lower natural agency. This created a social need to control and protect young women from themselves.

From a medical point of view, she was considered the safest within marriages. Her health was fertility, she was created to create, and nothing was more important. Every problem stemmed from her reproductive system and was solved by reproducing. Again, we see the value of women being deduced to her reproductive abilities. For society, her health is not important based on her wellbeing alone, but solely her ability to provide more citizens.

This was all solved with early marriages, that hopefully created children quickly. This however came with issues too. Despite the signs of menstruation, that would indicate a body was ready to have children, young bodies were often not mature enough yet. The remains of ERC110 illustrate a real issue. Most people would have had personal experiences with young women passing in childbirth. Thus, making it a commonly known challenge to society. Multiple literary works discuss the death of many young women in childbirth, and further advises against early marriages. However, these warnings were mostly ignored by the public. The existing social structure was too ingrained into society to be changed so easily.

As the Catullus quote said «Your maidenhead is not all your own; partly it belongs to your parents, a third part is given to your father, a third part is given to your mother, only a third is yours»

The first third was given to the father, a man who likely loved his daughter, but his concern for her well-being, and for the well-being of his family as a whole would make him marry her off early and hope for the best. At least he could sit with the feeling that he did all he could because that is what societal norms said was the correct action. The second part was given to the mother. Despite having gone through the same herself, the mother would prepare her daughter for married life the best way she could. This did not aid her daughter's chances. Mothers thought they helped by gifting their daughters the virtue of moderation through training, regardless of it resulted in malnutrition. Only one part belonged to the young woman. She had one third of her agency and was socially conditioned to believe that her body controlled that part.

Concluding remarks

Through this article, I have explored the consequences young women faced due to Greek and Roman social gender norms, with particular attention to whether it led to increased infant- and maternal mortality rate. Through the cases of Well G5:3 and ERC110 I have discussed how the value put on virginity and the social expectation and prejudice of a young woman’s reproductive system aided in pushing the marriable age down. Aspects as economy, social standing and health made generations of women go through unnecessary difficult pregnancies. Furthermore, it also likely cost many women their lives that would not have died if they hadn't undergone an early pregnancy. The social gender norms of Ancient Athens, and the early Roman Empire eventuated in the subordination of women, and the lack of woman’s reproductive agency. A further consequence of these norms was an increase in infant- and maternal mortality rates. However-systems are not easily changed, particularly as the different actors may be conditioned to accept inequality in social structures as natural. We can perhaps surmise that even when young women recognized the unfair balance of power and agency under which they lived, their power to effect change was limited.

Summary

This article argues that the social gender norms of Ancient Athens and the early Roman Empire did not give women any reproductive agency. The norms moreover affected the infant- and maternal mortality rates. The article employs gender theory. Further, it examines both archaeological material and ancient texts as premise to discuss women’s reproductive agency. The discussion of women’s agencies over their own body is relevant both in a historical and contem-
porary context. It is an important topic that necessitates further study.

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