CHAPTER 9

Patience for the Little Patient: The Infant in Soranus’ Gynaecia

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Despite advocating perpetual virginity and viewing childbirth as inherently injurious to female health, Soranus’ attitude towards the infant in Book 2 of the Gynaecia is remarkably positive. In fact, it is only towards the infant that Soranus displays such consistently positive attitude. This compassionate approach is evident both in the content and the language employed, which is characterised by a striking occurrence of diminutives. His preference here for authorities such as Thracians and Scythians rather than illustrious ones, along with his ‘language of the nursery’, points to an oral, rather than literary, tradition. Soranus seems to have been the first to write so extensively on childcare; freed from the influence of any earlier tradition, he engaged in a more nuanced vision of childhood, seeing it as a ‘blank slate’ both physically and mentally, untouched by the faults of adulthood. While the content of Book 2 has been mined for information concerning the practicalities of child-care, it has not been evaluated in terms of its differences from the rest of the Gynaecia, which are significant.

1 Introduction

Pregnancy is unhealthy; it brings atrophy, atony and untimely old-age to child bearers. So Soranus would have us believe, according to the Gynaecia.¹ In fact, he observes, were childbearing not necessary for the continuity of the human race, perpetual virginity would be better, both for men and for women.² So perhaps, one might think, it would be with some reluctance that Soranus devotes almost a third of the Gynaecia to the delivery and subsequent care of infants, and that the account would be tinged by, at best, some ambivalence towards

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* All translations of Greek and Latin texts are my own.
1 Sor., Gyn. 1.42.5.
2 Ibid., 1.32.3.
this health-destroying individual. I will argue here, however, that Soranus is remarkably and consistently positive in his attitude towards the infant; furthermore, I will suggest that this positive representation is exceptional in two respects: firstly, within the *Gynaecia* itself, in that we encounter this positive attitude only in relation to the infant; and secondly, in the larger context, that this depiction is unlike that of any other author.

2 Contraception, Miscarriage, Abortion and Infanticide

Soranus is certainly a keen advocate of contraception; better, he says, not to conceive in the first place than to resort to drastic measures later. On the matter of abortion, Soranus is quite clear, allying himself with those who do indeed proscribe abortifacients, but only with discrimination; that is, not to those desiring an abortion because of adultery or vanity, but only to those who would be endangered by the birthing process. As soon as conception is confirmed, Soranus advocates every measure should be taken to preserve what

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3 *Ibid.*, 1.61.1. Contraceptives include barrier and rhythm methods, a form of withdrawal method in which the woman pulls back at the time of ejaculation, and vaginal pessaries composed of *materia medica* with contracting, cooling and styptic properties.

4 *Ibid.*, 1.60.2. Soranus notes the discord between those who reject the use of abortifacients, citing Hippocratic injunctions, and those who prescribe them with discrimination; we have no means of identifying these opposing groups. While the Hippocratic *Oath* forbids the physician from giving an abortive pessary, the treatise *Diseases of Women* (*Mul*. 1.78) includes a number of recipes for expellant drinks, salves and fumigants, in addition to expellant pessaries; most are specifically aimed at driving out a dead or seriously maimed foetus, but some cases are less clear; for example, χαλβάνην δὸσιν ἐλαίην τρίψας ἐν κεδρίνῳ ἐλαίῳ προσθέσθω· τοῦτο δύναται διαφθείρειν καὶ ἐκβάλλειν τὸ νωχελές (L. 8.184, 17–19) "Grind all-heal, the size of an olive, in cedar-oil and apply. This is strong enough to destroy and to produce an abortion." The physician author of *On the Nature of the Child* (*Nat. Puer. 13 = L. 7.490*) recommends leaping, bringing the heels to the buttocks, as a means of dislodging an unwanted embryo; Sor., *Gyn*. 1.60.1 notes that some see a distinction between this type of physical expellant, not considering it a true abortifacient, and a pharmaceutical one. Among those closer to Soranus’ time, both Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder record the contraceptive and/or abortive properties of *materia medica*; see Riddle, J. M. (1992). *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, 31–56, 82–84. Riddle also suggests that Scribonius Largus, an opponent of abortion, unwittingly supplies information on abortifacients by describing emmenagogues, 84–85. King, H. (1998). *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, 145–46 challenges this view that menses-inducing measures are hidden abortifacients; see also Totelin, L. M. V. (2009). *Hippocratic Recipes: Oral and Written Transmission of Pharmacological Knowledge in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Greece*, 214–24. On methods of