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In his introduction, Kapparis states that he has tried to “produce a ‘readable and synthesized’ treatment of the available evidence, without losing sight of time and place” (5). In this book Kapparis does collect, in English, most of the sources and results of the work that has been done on abortion in the ancient world since the publication of Enzo Nardi’s Procurato aborto nel mondo Greco-Romano (Milan, 1971), and most of the conclusions collected at the end of each chapter I find unobjectionable. To this extent, this is a useful book. However, the general tenor and the organization of the discussion within each chapter does, I think, lose sense of time and place, especially in the case of classical Athens, which is the main focus of Kapparis’s interest.

Rather than treating each culture chronologically, Kapparis presents the material in six main chapters: (1) “Methods of Abortion”; (2) “When Does Human Life Begin?”; (3) “The Doctor’s Dilemma”; (4) “The Woman’s Point of View”; (5) “The Man’s Point of View”; (6) “Abortion and the Law.” Even the subsections within each chapter are not chronological periods. Within each subsection, Kapparis clearly strives for a chronological arrangement, but he is not always successful, and there are times when the chronological progression will not be clear to the non-specialist. When discussing the role of midwives, for instance, Kapparis begins with Soranus’ description of their role, saying, “The few available references to the role of the midwife in the community reveal that Greek midwives were well-respected figures with an important role to play as health advisers, and a daunting list of responsibilities” (85). There is no initial indication that Soranus’ remarks are directed to midwives in Rome of the second century C.E. After backtracking to take account of a remark in Plato’s Theaetetus, Kapparis concludes, “the tasks of the midwife had not really changed much from the classical period to the time of Soranus (second century AD)” (87). The conclusion from just these two citations is questionable in the extreme, but without further cultural embedding, the statement is virtually meaningless. In ancient Greece, for example, a midwife was expected to have given birth herself, and the role would often have been filled simply by the older female members of a household, whereas Soranus says that personal experience in childbirth is not a prerequisite for a midwife because he sees it as a far more professional position. Even when Kapparis does present the material with strong chronological and cultural markers, it would be very hard for a non-specialist to separate out from each subsection the strands that go together to make a cohesive society.

One of the biggest problems in the tenor of Kapparis’s discussion derives from his projecting the later, largely Christian, concern over the fate of the fetus into the classical Greek period. Obviously there was a range of opinions on the subject in antiquity, just as there is today; and there were probably many people, especially pregnant women and prospective fathers, who felt a strong emotional attachment to the fetus at all stages. However, one cannot begin to assess the
attitude towards abortion in ancient Athens without acknowledging that the society countenanced the exposure of newborn infants. Kapparis does not deal with this issue at any length until pages 154–62. On page 69 he tries to downplay its significance by saying, “An individual’s conscience, strength of religious feeling, and broad perception of human identity would be important factors in the decision over the fate of an unwanted infant.” But conscience, religious feeling, and perception of human identity for the vast majority of people are largely shaped by the culture in which they live. Athenians, and other Greeks, lived in a society in which they could, with impunity, expose a newborn simply for being female. While I am sure that in many cases it was a heart-wrenching decision, we cannot simply use our reactions to the practice to gauge the motivations and emotions prevalent in ancient Greece. Greek attitudes to the fetus in utero cannot be divorced from this acceptance of infanticide. It was not a culture to inculcate moral concern for the fate of an unwanted fetus per se.

The most common opinion apparent in the Presocratic texts is that life begins at birth, and the Hellenistic doctors and the Stoics clearly share this belief. Nevertheless, Kapparis argues that “most classical authors seem to be gradualists, namely supporters of the theory that life begins at some point between conception and birth as the embryo is maturing in the womb” (42). He believes this came about through observations on fetal development made by Hippocratic doctors (52). Of course Hippocratic treatises demonstrate the continuum of fetal development from conception to birth, but in the section on “gradualist” theories (44–52), Kapparis cites no evidence that any Greek thinker before Aristotle regarded the fetus as an individual with rights. The only support he cites in the Hippocrates is the remark in On the Nature of the Child that a fetus “becomes a child” (gegonen paidion) after formation (46). However, Kapparis does not note that the author continues to use the terms paidion and embruon interchangeably to refer to the fetus after articulation, even after quickening (e.g., 21.1 and 2).

On this shaky evidence that the Hippocrates were “gradualists,” Kapparis argues that the famous clause in the Hippocratic oath, “I will not give a woman a pessary to procure an abortion,” is a stern prohibition on all forms of abortion at any stage after conception that is derived from a respect for human life in antenatal form. He reconciles this with the cultural acceptance of infanticide by simply stating, “All societies have contradictory laws and moral standards” (75). But in the absence of any evidence that the author is writing in a society or professional culture that regarded abortion as killing a human individual, the clause simply forbids the use of pessaries. Pessaries were considered far more threatening to the woman’s health than were oral abortifacients, as is clear from a variety of points in Kapparis’ book itself. Nevertheless, the presumption that runs through the book is that in the classical period “many doctors broadly accepted the principle that induced abortion is incompatible with the nature of medicine as the science of saving human lives” (77).

Kapparis perceives ancient doctors as agreeing to perform abortions only
when a continued pregnancy seriously threatened the mother’s health. Doctors who perform abortions in other situations are pictured as abandoning their professional principles for money and uttering “not a single word of criticism of a patient’s morals.” Apropos of one passage in the Hippocratic treatise On the Seed, where the author matter of factly describes how he produced an abortion in a kinswoman’s slave, Kapparis remarks, “the author is not in a moralizing mood” (111). The weight of the evidence rather suggests that in the classical period, as long as the rights of a husband were not involved, abortion was not a moral issue. Kapparis projects much later perceptions of human identity back onto doctors in the classical period.

Another problem of projection is Kapparis’s belief that he can get to the woman’s point of view from exclusively male-authored texts. The fact that he acknowledges there may be objections to this method does not legitimize it. His justification is that sometimes, male authors have “identified quite successfully with a female point of view” (4). His criterion of success is that an author puts forward a point of view that Kapparis can imagine a woman holding.

The example he cites is that of the author Chariton, who has his heroine Callirhoe wrestle with the decision of whether to abort the fetus she conceived by her husband Chaireas after she has become a slave. Her reasons for considering abortion are to prevent the child of such a noble house being thought a bastard and raised as a slave. Her reasons against abortion are the pity she feels for the child in her womb and her reflection that, unlike Medea, her husband is not an enemy—even though her misadventures began when Chaireas kicked her in the stomach. (He had chosen to believe a plot that made it look as if Callirhoe had been adulterous rather than trust her protestations of faithfulness. Thinking he had killed Callirhoe, he buried her. Grave robbers opened the tomb, and it was they who sold her into slavery.) Despite this history, Callirhoe hopes her child will be a son who looks like Chaireas. Finally, Callirhoe has a dream in which an image of Chaireas appears to her and says, “‘Wife, I entrust you with my son.’ While he was still speaking, Callirhoe woke up wanting to embrace him. Considering that her husband had advised her to do so, she decided to keep the child.” Some, perhaps many (but surely not all), female readers may have completely sympathized with Callirhoe when reading the novel, but it was clearly written from a male point of view of how a dutiful wife would feel in such circumstances. In any case, Callirhoe’s predicament cannot be used, as Kapparis uses it later in the book, as “a seemingly realistic setting” giving us “an insight into what social reasons could lead a married woman to attempt an abortion” (123). Even though there were times of great instability in the ancient world, in historical times the number of pregnant noblewomen that were enslaved while their husbands were alive and unaware of the fact must always have been meager.

Kapparis’s reference to the reasons married women might seek abortion may be referring back to Chaireas’ supposedly deadly beating of Callirhoe when he thought she had been unfaithful to him. As evidence that women in classical
Greece were afraid of being beaten to death if they were discovered in adultery. Kapparis cites a long passage (two pages) from a modern Greek novel in which a husband returning to Lesbos from World War I does just this in graphic detail. However, in both this case and that of Chaireas and Callirhoe, the husband is portrayed as feeling a passionate love for his wife that is not common in the portrayal of most classical marriages. More importantly, Lysias' *On the Murder of Eratosthenes* depicts a husband's violence as being directed only against the male adulterer. It is not clear from the speech that he even divorced his wife. Similarly, the case of the niece of Temenes recorded in *Epidemics* 4.26 suggests that unmarried girls who became pregnant did not always face extreme social sanctions. At the end of her case the doctor comments, "If she had a baby, I do not know."

We can try to assess the social, economic, and personal sanctions facing ancient women who had to make the choice between going through with an unwanted pregnancy and undergoing a dangerous abortion, but the emotions of these women are largely irrecoverable. Until recently, abortion has always been risky, but this does not mean that women who had abortions believed that they themselves were at great risk. They would seek out, and want to believe in, reliable methods and practitioners. Kapparis seems to me to exaggerate ancient women's perceptions of how much danger an abortion involved and the severity of the sanctions they faced because, just as he wished to absolve ancient doctors from performing abortions too readily, he wishes to absolve women from taking "the easy way out."

In his preface, Kapparis states, "with an issue such as abortion, emotional participation, empathy and a personal perspective can only add to one's understanding and interpretation of history" (viii). His humanistic desire to understand and empathize with real women and doctors in antiquity is a laudable one. Too often the ancient world is investigated as if all the individuals in it were simply ciphers filling cultural niches whose actions ran within social norms with nary a conflicted emotion. However, I feel that Kapparis, while truly trying to remain open-minded, has allowed his own views on abortion to color his perceptions of the realities of the ancient world. The apologetic tone of his argument implies that he feels that doctors and women involved in abortion were doing something that needs defending and can only be defended by drawing the worst possible scenario of what would happen if the pregnancy were to continue.

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