

# Reproductive Agency and the Role of the Female Psyche in Soranus' *Gynaecology*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

1. Sor, *Gyn*, 1.35, 1.39, 4.54

### Female Psyche's Impact Pre-Conception

2. ὡς γὰρ χωρὶς ὀρέξεως οὐκ ἐνδεχόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρρένων τὸ σπέρμα καταβληθῆναι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον χωρὶς ὀρέξεως ὑπὸ τῶν θηλειῶν οὐκ ἐνδεχόμενον αὐτὸ συλληφθῆναι. καὶ ὡς ἡ τροφή χωρὶς ὀρέξεως καταποθεῖται καὶ μετὰ τινος ἀποστροφῆς οὐ καλῶς κατατάσσεται καὶ τῆς ἐπιβαλλούσης <ἀπο> τυγχάνει πέψεως, οὕτως οὐδὲ τὸ σπέρμα δύναται ἀναληφθῆναι τε καὶ κρατηθὲν κυοφορηθῆναι δίχα τοῦ **παρεῖναι** πρὸς συνουσίαν ὀρμὴν καὶ ὄρεξιν. (Just as without appetite it is impossible for the seed to be discharged by the male, in the same manner, without appetite it cannot be conceived by the female. And as food swallowed without appetite and with some aversion is not well received and fails in its subsequent digestion, neither can the seed be taken up or, if grasped, be carried through pregnancy unless urge and appetite for intercourse have been present).<sup>2</sup> Sor, *Gyn*, 1.37.
3. καὶ γὰρ εἴ τινες **βιασθεῖσαι** συνέλαβον, ἔστι καὶ ἐπὶ τούτων εἰπεῖν, ὅτι τὸ μὲν τῆς ὀρέξεως πάντως πάθος καὶ ταύταις παρῆν, **ἐπεσκοτεῖτο** δὲ ὑπὸ **ψυχικῆς κρίσεως** (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 it was obscured by mental resolve). Sor, *Gyn*, 1.38.
4. οὐ γὰρ ἰκανὸν τὸ πρὸς συνουσίαν ὀρμητικῶς ἔχειν, ἐὰν μὴ καὶ τὸ κατάστημα τοῦ σώματος ἐπιτηδεῖως ἔχη.....οὕτως οὐδὲ [ἐν] τῷ τῆς συνουσίας ὀρέγεσθαι [καιρῷ] τὸ εὐκαιρον σύνεστιν, εἰ μὴ καὶ τὰλλα συνεποπτεύομεν· ταῖς μὲν γὰρ καταφερεστέρας ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ τὸ πρὸς συνουσίαν ὀρμητικὸν συμπάρεστιν. (For it is not enough to feel the urge towards intercourse unless the condition of the body is suitable too.... Similarly, the proper time does not depend solely on the craving for intercourse if in addition we do not consider the rest of the circumstances; for in the more lecherous women the urge towards intercourse exists at any time). Sor, *Gyn*, 1.38.
5. a. [φύσιν] εἴτε δύναται προνοοῦσα τῶν ἀνθρώπων **μετρήσαι** τὰς ὀρέξεις, ὅπως μὴ πλείονα λάβωσι τὴν τροφήν, ἢ κωλύσαι γενέσθαι τι περισσόν. ἥς γὰρ ἴδιον κηδεμονικῶς **ἀποκρίναι** τὸ πλεονάσαν... (nature) in her providence for men is able to measure their appetites so that they do not partake of too much food, or whether she can prevent the formation of surplus material). Sor, *Gyn*, 1.28  
b. See also: The emphasis on the best bodily state for intercourse being the natural and regulated state of the body is repeated at 1.35; 1.36 and 1.38 as well.

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<sup>1</sup>*Nota Bene*: This paper focuses on psychic impact because it hypothesizes that Soranus' space for female intervention can be measured through analyzing moments of the woman's psyche *in relation to* reproduction, regulation, nature, and health. This investigation recognizes "agents" as those that take an active role in producing a specified effect, and agency as moments of chosen action to impact the reproductive process within a system that seems to deny volition to the female body. It recognizes that female actions in *Gynaecology* are not immediately obvious as agential. There is a challenge that exists in this project because the language of female agency is not explicit in Soranus' Greek. However, "agency" is not an unfounded concept during his time; Thumiger outlines the language of "will" that existed in the late antique period. This paper tracks modes of intervention or disruption within the text that may be framed as degrees of female deliberation. It is necessary to read against the grain and envision a schema that does not track perfectly as a Greek concept (one not codified in the text).

<sup>2</sup> Translations are from Owsei Temkin. *Soranus' Gynecology of Ephesus*. Johns Hopkins University Press c1956; revised 1991.

6. οὕτω καὶ τὰ σώματα τὰ τῶν θηλειῶν **παρὰ φύσιν** διακείμενα οὐ κρατεῖ τῶν μεθειμένων εἰς αὐτὰ σπερμάτων, ἀλλὰ τῆ παρ' **ἑαυτῶν κακίᾳ** συννοσεῖν ἢ καὶ ἀπόλλυσθαι ταῦτα **ἀναγκάζει**. (So the female bodies which are in a state [contrary to nature] do not lay hold of the seed injected into them, but by their own badness compel the latter to sicken or even to perish). **Sor, Gyn, 1.35**. (Bracket in translation mine).
7. καὶ τοιαῦτα μὲν λέγουσιν ἑκατέρωθεν. ἡμεῖς δὲ τὴν διηνεκῆ παρθενίαν ὑγιεινὴν εἶναί φαμεν, ὅτι βλαβερὰ κατὰ γένος ἢ συνουσία, καθάπερ ἐν τῷ Ὑγιεινῷ διὰ πλειόνων ἀποδέδεικται. (And such are the arguments of the two sides. We, however, contend that permanent virginity is healthful, because intercourse is harmful in itself as has been shown in more length in the book "On Hygiene."): **Sor, Gyn, 1.32**
8. This causal ambiguity is furthered by an analogy to mourners that Soranus provides (which I address in a longer version of this paper). ὄν τρόπον καὶ ταῖς πενθούσαις ἢ μὲν πρὸς τὴν τροφὴν ὄρεξις πολλὰκις ὕπεστιν, ἐπισκοτεῖται δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς διὰ τὴν συμφορὰν λύπης· ὕστερον γοῦν ἀναγκάζονται παρῳσάμεναι τὴν κρίσιν τραφῆναι διὰ τὸν ὑπερβάλλοντα λιμόν. ("Similarly, in women who mourn, appetite for food often exists but is obscured by grief from their misfortune. Indeed, later they are compelled to eat by reason of exceeding hunger, putting aside their resolve"). Here, there is a dichotomy between two relatively autonomous forces: 1) the emotion of grief and its manipulation by κρίσιν in opposition to 2) hunger (an imperative in her body that forces aside the initial choice to cease consumption). Because the prevention of hunger does not last, Soranus seems to imply that hunger (a non-psychical element like sexual appetite) compels the woman to eat, displacing the emotional resolve of grief. Conversely, the other verb in the sentence "putting aside" (ὑπερβάλλω) implies more ambiguity in action; perhaps the female could choose to eat (an agentic decision).
9. καὶ ἐν τοῖς πλησιασμοῖς ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς συνουσίας, ὅταν ὁ ἀνὴρ ἀποκρίνειν τὸ σπέρμα μέλλι, κατέχειν χρὴ τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ μικρὸν ὑφέλκειν ἑαυτήν, ὡς μὴ πορρωτέρω ἐν τῷ κύτει τῆς μήτρας τὸ σπέρμα ἀκοντισθῆναι, καὶ διαναστᾶσαν εὐθέως καὶ ὀκλάξ καθίσασαν παρμὸν κινεῖν καὶ περιμάξασθαι τὸν κόλπον ἐπιμελῶς ἢ καὶ ψυχρὸν πίνειν. συνεργεῖ δὲ τῆ ἀσυλληψία καὶ τὸ διαχρίειν τὸ στόμα τῆς ὑστέρας ἐλαίῳ παλαιῷ ἢ μέλιτι ἢ (And during the sexual act, at the critical moment of coitus when the man is about to discharge the seed, the woman must hold her breath and draw herself away a little, so that the seed may not be hurled too deep into the cavity of the uterus. And getting up immediately and squatting down, she should induce sneezing and carefully wipe the vagina all around; she might even drink something cold. It also aids preventing conception to spear the orifice of the uterus all over before with old olive oil or honey...) **Sor, Gyn, 1.61**.

### Female Psyche's Impact Post-Conception

10. <τὸ δ'> **ἐπίλυπόν** τε καὶ **θυμικὸν** τῆς **ψυχῆς** <διὰ> τὴν ταραχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος **ἀποθεῖ** τὸ συλλαμβανόμενον). ([the] sorrowful and passionate [state] of the soul, [on the other hand] expels the fetus [because of] the disturbance of the breath). **Sor, Gyn, 1.34**
11. οἱ δὲ καὶ τὰς μῆτε χαρὰς μῆτε λύπας τοῖς ὄμμασιν <ἐμφαινούσας καὶ τὰς> δὲ τῷ χρώματι ταχέως τρεπομένας, καὶ μάλιστα ἐπὶ τὸ μελανώτερον, ἀνεπιτηδειότερας ἔλεξαν· πολλὴν γὰρ εἶναι **θερμασίαν** ἐπὶ τούτων τῆς ὀρέξεως τρέπουσαν καὶ μελαινουσαν, δι' ἣν καὶ τρόπῳ τινὶ τὸ σπέρμα φρυγόμενον **ἐξαφανίζεσθαι**. (But some people have included those women who show neither joy nor sorrow in their expression while considering as less fitted those who quickly change color, especially if the color deepens. For, they maintain, there is much heat in their desire causing the change and the darkening; by this heat the seed, dried up in some fashion, is destroyed). **Sor, Gyn, 1.35**.
12. τί δεῖ λέγειν, ὅτι καὶ τὸ ποιὸν **τῆς ψυχῆς κατάστημα φέρει τινὰς περὶ τοὺς τύπους τῶν συλλαμβανομένων μεταβολάς**; (what is one to say concerning the fact that various states of the soul also produce certain changes in the mold of the fetus?) ... ἵνα οὖν μῆτε ἄμορφον ἀποτελεσθῆ τὸ γεννώμενον ἀλλοκότους φαντασίας ἐν τῷ μεθύειν τῆς ψυχῆς ὑπομενούσης, νηφέτωσαν αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν τοῖς πλησιασμοῖς, εἴθ' ὅτι καὶ πρὸς τὰς μητέρας ὁμοιότης τις οὐ κατὰ σῶμα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀναφέρεται τῶν γεννωμένων. καλὸν οὖν εὐσταθούση τῆ κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀναφέρεται τῶν γεννωμένων. καλὸν οὖν εὐσταθούση τῆ ψυχῆ καὶ μὴ **παρακόπῳ διὰ μέθην** ὅμοιον ἀποτελεσθῆναι τὸ γεννώμενον. (Thus, in order that the offspring may not be rendered misshapen, women must be sober during coitus because in

drunkenness the soul becomes the victim of strange phantasies; this furthermore, because the offspring bears some resemblance to the mother as well, not only in body but in soul. Therefore, it is good that the offspring be made to resemble the soul when it is stable and not deranged by drunkenness). **Sor, Gyn, 1.39**

13. δεῖ τοίνυν τῆς συλλήψεως γενομένης **φυλάττεσθαι** πᾶσαν ὑπερβολὴν καὶ **κίνησιν σωματικὴν τε καὶ ψυχικὴν**. (When conception has taken place, one must beware of every excess change both bodily and psychic). **Sor, Gyn, 1.46**
14. **ἐξίεται** γὰρ τὸ σπέρμα καὶ διὰ **φόβον** καὶ διὰ **λύπην** καὶ **χαρὰν** αἰφνίδιον καὶ καθόλου **διανοίας** ἰσχυρὰν **ταραχὴν**. (For the seed is evacuated through fright, sorrow, sudden joy and, generally, by severe mental upset) **Sor, Gyn, 1.46**
15. τοῦ σπέρματος δὲ ἀποπτυσθέντος... παραμυθεῖσθαι δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν... ( If the seed is ejected... one must appease the soul...) **Sor, Gyn, 1.47**
16. ταῖς δὲ πρὸς τὰ **βλαβερὰ** τῶν κυουσῶν ἐπιθυμίαις τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἐνστατέον διὰ λόγων, ὡς τῆς ἀπ' αὐτῶν βλάβης [καὶ] τῶν τὰς ἐπιθυμίας πληρούντων **παραλόγως** ἢ καὶ τὸν στόμαχον κακούσης, οὕτως δὲ καὶ τὸ κατὰ **γαστρός**, (one must oppose the desires of pregnant women for harmful things first by arguing that the damage from the things which satisfy the desires in an unreasonable way harms the fetus just as it harms the stomach;) **Sor, Gyn, 1.53**
17. ἀπωθέω (destroy (1.34)), ἐξαφανίζω (destroy), συννοσέω (sicken), ἀπόλλυμι (perish (1.35)), change (φέρει μεταβολάς (1.39)), ἐξεριστεύω (eject (1.46)), κακῶω (harm (1.53)).
18. **a. Sor, Gyn, 1.46.**  
**b.** See also: **Sor, Gyn, 1.34.** Soranus omits description of medical treatment in terms of *how* authorities should externally treat this sorrow to prevent fetal expulsion, it is simply stated as a concern.
19. **a. διαχύσει τῆς ψυχῆς** ([the woman must generally divert her *ψυχή*]). (Bracket in translation mine). **Sor, Gyn, 1.54**  
**b.** οὕτω καὶ τὰ σώματα τὰ τῶν θηλειῶν παρὰ φύσιν διακείμενα οὐ κρατεῖ τῶν μεθιεμένων εἰς αὐτὰ σπερμάτων, ἀλλὰ τῆ παρ' **ἑαυτῶν κακία** συννοσεῖν ἢ καὶ ἀπόλλυσθαι ταῦτα **ἀναγκάζει**. (So the female bodies which are in a state [against nature] do not lay hold of the seed injected into them, but by their own badness compel the latter to sicken or even to perish). **Sor, Gyn, 1.35**  
**c. Sor, Gyn, 1.39.** (Above at #11)  
**d.** καὶ διὰ **ὑπόνοιαν** δὲ τοῦ μὴ συνειληφέναι δυστοκία γίνεται. (difficult labor also occurs because of the idea of not being pregnant). **Sor, Gyn, 4.54**
20. **a.** τῆ ἀνέσει καὶ τῷ χαλάσματι δεῖ. (one should promote ease and relaxation). **Sor, Gyn, 4.59.**  
**b.** Similar instances occur when rest is prescribed for melancholic madness and mania (Sor, Gyn, 3.48). Also see 1.46.
21. **a.** ταῖς δὲ πρὸς τὰ βλαβερὰ τῶν κυουσῶν ἐπιθυμίαις τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἐνστατέον διὰ λόγων, ὡς τῆς ἀπ' αὐτῶν βλάβης [καὶ] τῶν τὰς ἐπιθυμίας πληρούντων **παραλόγως** ἢ καὶ τὸν στόμαχον κακούσης, οὕτως δὲ καὶ τὸ κατὰ γαστρός, (one must oppose the desires of pregnant women for harmful things first by arguing that the damage from the things which satisfy the desires in an unreasonable way harms the fetus just as it harms the stomach); **Sor, Gyn, 1.53**  
**b.** See also: **Sor, Gyn, 1.39.** (Above at #11)

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