

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

This paper considers the impact of female psychological action in relation to female agency in Soranus' *Gynaecology*. It asserts that the female psyche's capacity to interfere with the reproduction process reflects an agency – often assumed to be absent from female patients – that registers as resistance to regulation of the reproductive imperative or as self-regulation. While prior work on female volition in ancient Greek medical literature has focused on the absence of female agency within the Hippocratic corpus (King, 1998; Halperin, 2003; Dean-Jones, 2003) or on the expansive male volition in the late-antique period (Thumiger 2018; Flemming, 2000), little attention has been paid to Soranus' *Gynaecology* and the effect of its inclusion of the female psyche (*ψυχή*). Importantly however, Soranus' *Gynaecology*, in contrast to medical literature from the classical period, affords to the female *psukhē* the capacity to act on, or disrupt, the reproductive process. Further analysis of Soranus' work reveals that the female psyche and female mind repeatedly inflict change on each stage of reproduction, from intercourse to labor itself. Indeed, an unregulated psyche can dispel the seed post-conception, cause difficult labor, and misshape the fetus (1.35, 1.39, 4.54). Once such example occurs in Soranus' description of the care for the pregnant woman in which he shifts from a somatic description to write that those with a steady and cheerful mind (*εὐσταθεῖς δὲ τὴν διάνοιαν καὶ ἰλαράς*) are better for generation than the soul imbued with high spirits and sorrow (*ἐπίλυπὸν τε καὶ θυμικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς*), psychological elements which destroy the seed (*ἀπωθεῖ τὸ συλλαμβανόμενον*) (1.34). This paper investigates these examples of the psyche's action within the reproduction process but does not conclude that simply the presence of the psyche inherently suggests more female autonomy. Rather, it focuses on psychological action because it hypothesizes that degrees of female

autonomy can be measured through analyzing the psyche's relation to nature, health, and medical authority's regulation.

This paper argues that the relation between female psychical action and the regulatory forces that come together at moments during reproduction reconceptualize a space for degrees of female autonomy, agency delimited by Soranus as resistance to the reproductive imperative or as self-regulation. This examination reevaluates prior denial of female volition and reveals the moments of agentic choice that position the female in medical literature in a liminal space between a solely physiologically motivated being and an agent of psychical intervention and self-regulation.

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