

FERTILITY IN ROMAN SOCIETY

HUG (A.) *Fertility, Ideology, and the Cultural Politics of Reproduction at Rome. (Impact of Empire 45.)* Pp. xiv + 314, colour ill. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023. Cased, €132. ISBN: 978-90-04-54077-4.

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That ancient Roman women were expected to produce children, preferably male heirs, for their families is a generally well-understood fact. That they were expected to produce children for the state is perhaps a less familiar aspect of Roman history, but one that H. brings to the fore in this robust study. While the childbearing expectations placed on women can be viewed as embedded in patriarchal systems of oppression, they can also be cast as systems that position fertile women as valuable participants in Roman families and the state. H.'s book largely takes that latter approach to reveal 'how elite Romans constructed *fecunditas* [fertility] as an important female virtue' (p. 3). This topic comes at an interesting moment in contemporary society, as the reproductive rights of women are being tested and stripped away in some parts of the world; some might argue that, as these rights are challenged, the rhetoric and expectations around the female body come precariously close to those exposed in H.'s study. In this regard, this book is timely, if sobering, and a must-read for scholars and students interested in gender, the Roman family and reproduction, and the roles of females in Roman political ideology.

H. opens the book with a passage from Livy in which Livy describes a speech by Sp. Ligustinus to a potentially mutinous group of soldiers (171 BCE). This is an important strategy for H. as it sets the stage for the remainder of the book. H. observes that, after some introductory remarks, Ligustinus does something 'odd'; before he outlines his military credentials, he provides details of his domestic life. He makes this move, H. argues, to appeal to the soldiers through a common language, that of the ideal Roman. What makes Ligustinus an ideal Roman, and thus one worth listening to, is his 'good' wife, who produced children – six sons and two daughters, both already married. As H. articulates, it is Ligustinus' unnamed wife's *fecunditas* ('fertility') that elevated both *his* civic status and *his* authority before the soldiers, as marriage and the bearing of children were deeply embedded values in the age of the Republic. Indeed, in the later Republic Cato the Younger allegedly divorced his wife so that his friend, Q. Hortensius, could marry her and produce offspring (in another version Hortensius asks for Cato's daughter, married with two sons). Whatever the case, the literary accounts normalise Cato's 'duty to Rome', with female fertility 'shared' between two spouses ultimately to benefit the state (p. 28). These are just two instances in the opening chapters of the book that show how the virtue of female fertility could be deployed for male personal and political gain and for the good of Roman society. To this end, H.'s study looks to the cultural history of *fecunditas* through literary sources (in this regard, the book is less concerned with demography) to show how *fecunditas* was promoted to be a female virtue just as important as the better-known virtue of *pudicitia* ('sexual virtue/modesty'), to which it was closely connected. And, as H. admits, the evidence for the construction of *fecunditas* resides largely in Italy and derives from the politically active and upper strata; it should also be borne in mind that the evidence is male-authored.

The book's first chapter lays the foundation for what follows, namely, a wide view of the intersecting roles of marriage and children in Roman society, especially among free women. H. articulates early on that 'Rome was a deeply pronatalist society, supporting, encouraging, and perhaps even demanding *fecunditas* in its citizen women' (p. 11). Here, she resists scholarly accounts that suggest that the first emperor of Rome, Augustus, set penalties for citizens who remained unmarried and/or childless during their reproductive years (legislated in 18 BCE and 9 CE) in response to *intentional* declining

birth rates. Instead, H. argues that Augustus' legislation reinforced long-held ideals in a time of great political change and on the heels of the trauma of the civil wars. Augustus, by legislating procreation, positioned himself as championing 'ancestral values' in an era desperate for stability. As the legal codes affected both the aristocracy and ordinary Romans, Augustus sought to assert his new paternal authority over the state and its people.

The following three chapters provide a detailed examination of how *fecunditas* was constructed and negotiated among various social strata (although with greater emphasis to elite circles). H. argues that the notion of *fecunditas* was highly gendered, meaning that it was a term that could only be applied to women but still of pointed male concern. On the flip side, unless the male was proven impotent, presumed infertility was projected onto women, just as they bore the blame for producing children that turned out to be 'disappointments' or what is called unhappy fertility (pp. 50, 78–81). H. also brings into stark relief the notion of reciprocal obligations, a double-edged sword of *fecunditas* that was, for a woman, the 'most socially acceptable means' to secure her marriage (p. 90); and yet, fertile women were largely rendered invisible in the making of the Roman man and his social capital. As emerges from the funerary evidence that H. cites, the commemoration of wives and mothers was less about mourning them than emphasising the loss of any future *fecunditas*, which meant a loss to the husbands' status. H. also tackles the thorny issue of a married couple that lacked *fecunditas* and the strategies for overcoming involuntary childlessness (adoption, use of 'substitute' children, and divorce and remarriage). It is in this section that we get a glimpse into the emotional ties that may bind a married couple and the choices they had to confront when childless. Further, we see just how vulnerable women were in childless marriages (they could be divorced), but also how divorce, although legally acceptable, was of moral concern and not unproblematic.

The final two chapters cover a lot of ground and expose how *fecunditas* operated for the state and within the imperial family. If the goal of the empire was to expand, it did so through the female body, so much so that the health of the state was tied inextricably to the *fecunditas* of women. Women's bodies, whether enslaved, freed or free, were treated as vessels in the service of the state and as barometers on the health of the state. Privileges for having children, especially productive citizen children, became what H. identifies as a sweeping *fecunditas* project. This leads H. to the literary and visual evidence to explore how *fecunditas* was exploited in the service of dynastic succession where the stakes were extremely high (for example, proven *fecunditas* could not always protect imperial women from divorce or even their or their children's death).

H. admirably adduces a wealth of literary evidence to support her arguments, and throughout she judiciously includes legal, epigraphic and a smattering of numismatic material. While H.'s conclusions are sound, the book ultimately, perhaps by necessity, reifies male sources and ancient social constructs and thus risks reinscribing patriarchal ideology; *fecunditas* from the female perspective reads a bit under-theorised. Indeed, the book may be a charged read for many as women's reproductive capacities and expectations have come to the fore on some political and legal stages today. Beyond the scope of this volume, connections can be drawn between authoritarian ideologies from the past and present as women were, and are, made to conform to patriarchal constructions of female identity and biology. While *fecunditas* may have been represented as a female virtue, it unabashedly served the interests of Roman men and the state despite the physical and emotional tolls of childbearing and birthing on women in antiquity. There is much to think with in H.'s book, and much to learn from it.

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