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Introduction

RISK AND “THE MATTER OF THE MOTHER”

I WANT TO BEGIN with the moment I started working on this manuscript—during the first months that the pandemic engulfed the United States. Just weeks after the lockdown began, a good friend of mine was due to give birth in New York City. I worried about her often as March wore on, as we tried to understand the dangers posed by COVID-19, including the susceptibility of pregnant people to its more devastating effects. As the virus pulled us apart, our entanglements became all the more apparent. I mean this in the broadest sense, from the global supply chains that undergird our economies to the new daily reality in which the most mundane behaviors could bear deadly consequences for those in our midst, with cascading effects for countless others. In this changed world, my friend prepared to give birth at a hospital in New York that would not allow anyone to accompany pregnant people inside. The pandemic had disrupted our rituals of birth and death. It amplified our vulnerabilities—and privileges—as well as the awareness of how lives and bodies are enmeshed within hierarchies that leave some people much more exposed than others. Without realizing it at the time, I had set out to write a book about these very problems. In retrospect, I cannot imagine producing this book in any other setting but these scary, confusing times.

This book is about people who lived long ago, who were also deeply aware they inhabited an entangled world, pulsing with unseen connections and riven by entrenched hierarchies. Perceptions of these connections shaped how people managed the relentless cycles of pregnancy, birth, child-rearing, and mourning that characterized the vast majority of women’s lives under the Roman empire. The life history of a young woman named Veturia, whose story runs throughout the book, provides one extreme example: her epitaph, found in the Pannonian town of Aquincum (now part of Budapest, Hungary), informs us that she was married at eleven and died at twenty-seven, having birthed six children. At her death, only one survived. How would Veturia and her family

have understood such loss, child after child? What kinds of strategies did she use to protect herself and her infants, to equip them for better futures? How would Veturia, her kin, and caregivers have worked to mitigate the dangers of pregnancy and birth? Or put more generally, how did Romans approach the risks of childbearing? These questions do not yield simple answers.

Part of the answers' complexity lies in the fact that childbirth never occurs in isolation. Societies, like humans, reproduce themselves. The individual and collective are interdependent, which means, of course, an individual birth never exists in a vacuum; it may also assume wide social significance. Likewise, pervasive notions of social and generational stability acquire deeply personal dimensions. This was certainly true for Romans, whose concerns about childbearing, I argue, developed metonymically with efforts to shore up visions of the family, community, empire, and cosmos. Birth and its risks are thus an ideal locus for exploring Roman anxieties about social order and hierarchy at every level, from familial concerns about succession to the role of social status in communities—all the way up to the fate of the empire and the gods' implication in chance and destiny. At each scale, the pursuit of survival, continuity, and success requires the interface of human and nonhuman life forms and forces, connections that in turn shaped accounts of the hidden, mysterious features of human generation and its outcomes. These entanglements may simultaneously reinscribe and subvert hierarchies within human and nonhuman communities of care, a tension inherent to the rich, thick networks this book seeks to understand.

At the heart of the book is “the matter of the mother”—in the sense of both how mothers are deemed to *matter* (culturally, politically, cosmically) and perceptions of generative *matter* as a feature of their bodily materiality. This intertwining of normativity and materiality has deep roots; indeed, the phrase derives from the physician Galen, who imagined “the matter [*hulē*] of the mother, that in her veins” flowing through pregnant bodies, nourishing fetal life.¹ I want to stress, however, that many people who give birth do not call themselves or are not labeled “mothers,” nor (it should go without saying) must a person give birth to *become* a mother. Rather, this book focuses on a particular set of transformations, *as Romans understood them*, that culminate in and flow from childbirth—transformations that *can* make someone into a mother, or not.² These transformations affect how individuals *matter* within a culture, scaling from local kinship networks to rights and privileges in a vast empire.

1. Gal., *Sem.* 2.4.35 = *CMG* 5.3.1, 178.14 = 4.625K (ἡ τῆς μητρὸς ἡ ἐν ταῖς φλεψὶν ὕλη); see also Flemming 2021.

2. Cf. Leitaο 2012.

Femaleness has long been associated with materiality and matter—*hulē* in Greek and *materia* in Latin, related to *matrix* (“womb”) and *mater* (“mother”).³ Many discussions of these terms begin with Aristotle’s views on generation and sexual difference, especially his famously misogynistic characterization of female offspring as a kind of “fault, misstep, a deviation in the teleological transmission from father to son.”⁴ This characterization produces a startling problem, wherein females are cast as the consequence of “the unpredictable and unaccountable, the aleatory motions of matter,” as Emanuela Bianchi explains; yet such a viewpoint stands in tension with their teleological necessity in the process of generation among many creatures, producing what Bianchi calls “the feminine symptom” in Aristotle’s cosmos, in one sense of *sumptōma* in Greek, an “inexplicable coincidence.”⁵ For millennia, related assumptions about the connection between femaleness, matter, disruption, and chance have played out across philosophy, art, medicine, and popular culture—all of which find their place in the story of “risk” told in these pages.

Judith Butler explores these etymological connections (matter, *matrix*, *mater*) through the importance of matter as a “site of generation or origination,” concluding that “to speak within these classical contexts of *bodies that matter* is not an idle pun.”⁶ In this context, the sedimented meanings of “matter” are crucial to the project elucidating the materialization of what Butler calls the “heterosexual imperative.” In the cultural milieux explored in this book, what I call the “generative imperative” operated through numerous mechanisms of power at different, interlocking scales to produce and reproduce categories such as “girl,” “woman,” “mother,” and “wife.”⁷ Childbearing was intrinsic to

3. This last, etymological link was exploited powerfully in Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, as Nugent 1994 demonstrates, in an Epicurean universe where female bodies constitute “matter, but also void; fertility but also mortality” (at 205). The tight relationship between birth and death is explored below in chapter 5. See also Bianchi 2014, 232; Keith 2000, 36–64 (esp. 36–41); McAuley 2016, 114–66 (esp. 117–18, on female bodies and transformation).

4. Bianchi 2014, 3; on generation in Aristotle, see also Lehoux 2017, esp. 13–53.

5. Bianchi 2014, at 3–4; also 5–15, on the manifold meanings/implications of *sumptōma*; cf. Holmes 2010. Beard 2011 emphasizes the “aleatory” in a discussion of risk and Roman culture.

6. Butler 2011, 7 (6–7, on the etymologies): the terms raise serious stakes for intelligibility and meaning: “for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what ‘matters’ about the body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where ‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and ‘to mean.’”

7. Cf. Caldwell 2015, esp. 105–33. The terms “heterosexual” and “bisexual” (or similar) are controversial as descriptors of Roman behaviors/preferences; I generally opt not to use them. See Freidin forthcoming for overview and further discussion (also regarding the “generative

the social and even economic *value* of “women,” enacted as it was through networked, iterative efforts, which might also result in failure or abjection. But my concern with “matter” and gender/sex is by no means confined to the human. Indeed, this book foregrounds humans’ entanglement with nonhuman bodies and the contested space in between, “vibrant matter” in Jane Bennett’s formulation or “animacies” in Mel Chen’s—specifically, how materialities (including “things,” such as amulets) participate in communities of care, which may both reinforce *and* undermine social/gendered hierarchies.⁸

This is a book, then, about childbearing and the human and nonhuman networks within which it took place and through which it mattered. But it is also, simultaneously, a new history of “imperial Rome.” Versions of this history can certainly be told from the “center” of Roman power, not least because concerns with fertility extended to its highest reaches. The ascension of Augustus, which inaugurates the period I cover, marked an important shift in formulations of the relationship between public life and domesticity, as Kristina Milnor has shown.⁹ Augustus’s complex, controversial, and in many ways unprecedented social legislation, first introduced in 18 BCE, included measures to regulate adultery, promote marriage, and reward freeborn women who had three or more children. This pronatalist orientation suggests the laws were meant to prevent women—and elites especially—from eschewing procreation. The laws formed just one part of an ideology of (what we could call) Roman “family values,” central to imperial messaging for the next three hundred years, roughly the period covered in the book. While the impact and reach of the laws have at times been overstated or misunderstood, they were part of a long-term political investment in pronatalist ideology that underwent revision and transformation for centuries after Augustus’s death. This pronatalist ideology manifested itself across the empire in diverse idioms.¹⁰

As a project situated in time and place, and as one that prioritizes multiplicity and fragmentation, I argue that Rome’s story can—and indeed *should*—be told

imperative”). I use the term “generative” rather than “reproductive” in line with Hopwood, Flemming, and Kassell 2018. “Reproduction” has a situated, theoretical core, separating it from earlier conceptualizations they class under the term “generation” (see esp. Hopwood 2018). The polyvalence of “generation” has great theoretical potential; see, e.g., Simmons 2021.

8. Bennett 2010; Chen 2012. Cf. Neis 2017 and more recently Neis 2023, for a different but related approach to human generation and the nonhuman in early rabbinic science. Throughout this book, I often make use of gender/sex as a way to indicate the historical situatedness of our own vexed division between the concepts (for a survey, see Vigoya 2016).

9. Milnor 2008.

10. See, e.g., my discussion of the *Nutrices Augustae* (chapter 5); also Nifosi 2019, focusing on Roman-era Egypt.

through a history of childbearing and its challenges at nesting and overlapping scales, including through narratives of individual lives. While I mostly draw on evidence from Latin-speaking regions (from the city of Rome to Aquincum in modern Hungary to Maktar in modern Tunisia), I also engage with material from the “joined up,” cosmopolitan milieux of the eastern Mediterranean in the high empire, where the Greek language flourished.¹¹ This is certainly not to say that there was uniformity throughout the multiethnic, multicultural, and overwhelmingly rural empire—to do so would be to erase whole cultures and histories of oppression. Given the state of our evidence, however, it can be hard to get at many fine-grained local distinctions that surely existed. In what follows, I undertake the delicate task of capturing some of the diversity of approaches to similar problems, while identifying dominant modes of discourse and communication (such as the epigraphic habit or elite literary forms) that knitted people together across space and time. Consequently, the project often pursues its overarching themes and questions through geographies and sources that could traditionally be considered “peripheral” (a designation I usually find unhelpful: peripheral *to whom?*). Some actors in my narrative, furthermore, may have chafed against imperial overlords and colonizers as well as the ideologies that shaped their own participation in Roman institutions. Embracing this plurality of perspectives from across the empire (and up and down its hierarchies) is a very deliberate choice; it is the only way we can come to grips with deep questions about childbearing as a process that shaped the trajectory of individual lives and whole communities.

Situating Sources and Approach

Given its priorities, this book does not neatly fall into any one category. It is not strictly a “political,” “medical,” “social,” or “gender” history. Rather, I endeavor to bring these fields into conversation by engaging with an eclectic range of sources and methods. Within women’s and gender history, the project centers the study of ancient gynecology and obstetrics, a subfield pioneered (in the Anglophone world) by Ann Ellis Hanson, among others.¹² The subfield’s subsequent growth owes much to feminist classicists of the 1970s and 1980s and

11. Including the “joined up imperial medical culture” (Flemming 2013a, 273), explored in chapter 3.

12. The first wave of this trend also began with scholars including Gourevitch, Manuli, and Rousselle (in a robust francophone tradition); e.g., Gourevitch 1984, 1987, 1988; Manuli 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1983; Rousselle 1980, 1988 (Gourevitch, in particular, continued to publish on these topics well into the 2000s). Hanson began publishing on ancient gynecology in the 1970s (e.g., Hanson 1975) and continued for several decades (e.g., Hanson 1987, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 2004a,

the resultant transformation in understandings of gender and sexuality in Greek and Roman cultures—a scholarly tradition to which this book is deeply indebted.¹³ The present study also builds on work about “generation” in pre- and early modern cultures, including contributions to *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, edited by Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell. Maurizio Bettini cracked open a whole world of birth mythology in Greek and Roman cultures; work by Tara Mulder and Angela Hug continues to enhance our understanding in social, political, and medical history. I only regret that Hug’s monograph appeared too late for me to cite in this book.¹⁴ Childbirth can also participate in the rich history of Roman domestic life and “childhood.” Infancy, furthermore, and the transition from fetal to neonatal life has recently attracted more attention among Greek and Roman historians, exemplified by Maureen Carroll’s *Infancy and Earliest Childhood in the Roman World: “A Fragment of Time.”*¹⁵ The following studies would not exist without these developments and scholarly contributions.

Carroll not only demonstrates the powerful, affective roles very young children played in Roman domestic life but also synthesizes archaeological and bioarchaeological evidence to outline many of the dangers women and their infants faced. Across the Roman empire, skeletal remains reveal women buried with infants or fetuses, sometimes between their legs or at their feet—from Ampurias in Spain to Kempton in Germany to the Kellis cemetery at the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt.¹⁶ Bioarchaeological analyses lay bare some of the effects of chronic illnesses that afflicted people from infancy (especially around

2004b, 2008). Several landmark monographs cemented the contours of the subfield, especially Dean-Jones 1994b; Flemming 2000.

13. The influence of Pomeroy (1975) 1995 is hard to overstate. An overview of the history of gender and sexuality in feminist classics is beyond the scope of this introduction (or footnote); Holmes 2012a; Foxhall 2013; see also Skinner 2014; Surtees and Dyer 2020, 1–20, for helpful treatments. Richlin 2014a is also a crucial resource.

14. Hopwood, Flemming, and Kassell 2018; also Flemming 2000; Demand 1994; Duden 1991; J. L. Morgan 2004; Park 2006; Bettini 2013; Mulder 2015, 2016; Hug 2023 (building on Hug 2014).

15. Carroll 2018. Much controversy arose from Ariès 1996 (orig. publ. in French in 1960). The demography of Roman “families” emerged as a growth area in the 1980s, with Rawson (e.g., Rawson 1986) as a pioneering figure; by 1990, the field generated numerous monographs, including Néraudau 1984 and Golden 1990 on childhood; more recently, Huebner 2013. Early childhood and embryology are growth areas, e.g., Dasen 2013; Carroll and Graham 2014; Laes 2011a.

16. Carroll 2018, 59–60 (with bibliography), more generally, see 51–70; Laes 2011a, 55–56; Bourbou 2021, 49–50, on excavations at Aventicum in modern Switzerland and Kellis (also with bibliography) and summary of current scholarship on the bioarchaeology of maternal and fetal/infant death.

weaning); certain conditions, including rickets and malnutrition, may have impeded their ability to give birth safely later in life.¹⁷ Romans, of course, identified and interpreted symptoms and etiology very differently than we do, and in many ways (but not all, as we shall see), this was true of their perceptions of risk. This book sets out to understand how these *perceptions* speak to efforts to ensure social continuity and moderate humans’ relationship to the nonhuman environment in the pursuit of prosperity—at the level of families and households, communities, and the empire at large.

These priorities raise a persistent—and still urgent—question about those giving birth: what can we know about their communities of care and ideas about their own bodies, if our sources are overwhelmingly authored by men? Occasionally, a doctor will allude to discussions with women, as Galen attests regarding their sensation during conception (such episodes deserve their own careful analysis). Some papyri from Roman-era Egypt even reveal women, in their own voices, communicating about and planning for birth or sharing news in the aftermath.¹⁸ Still, such insights are rare. This question about sources certainly has a rich history in feminist classics/ancient history, including in the study of “women’s medicine.” Take, for example, the debate about whether Hippocratic gynecological works reproduce elements of a women’s oral tradition or rearticulate systems of patriarchal domination. In a synthetic gesture, Nancy Demand has suggested these viewpoints are in fact “products of different perspectives on the same situation,” in that the Hippocratic gynecological texts refract elements of women’s oral traditions through a masculine authorial lens.¹⁹ Whether we adopt the more optimistic or pessimistic reading of such sources, decades of work reveal this debate as one part of a much richer story (or more accurately, *stories*). The following chapters are designed to contribute stories of their own, imparting a more kaleidoscopic understanding of childbearing as a fundamental element of Roman life and thought.

To do so, I have assembled a highly varied archive, which does not put too much weight on any one discourse or approach, seeking a multiplicity of answers to my central question of risk. In a manner somewhat more in line with Véronique Dasen’s in *Le sourire d’Omphale: Maternité et petite enfance dans l’Antiquité*, I draw on eclectic sources, from funerary art and epigraphy to poetry and letters, from medical treatises and pharmacological handbooks to

17. Carroll 2018, 68 (rickets); symptoms may be observed in *Gyn.* 2.16.2–23 = Ilb. 2.43–44, blaming Roman mothers for the condition’s signature bowed legs. Here, however, I generally avoids retrospective diagnosis.

18. Gal., *Sem.* 2.5–9 = CMG 5.3.1, 66.1–17 = 4.514–15K; papyri include *POxf.* 19 (see chapter 1); *P. Fouad.* 1, 75 (chapter 5).

19. Demand 1994, xvi.

hematite amulets.²⁰ These materials offer the possibility of a multidimensional perspective on ideas and practices that would have shaped the lives of birthing people and their offspring—and the very manner in which they anticipated birth, understood its risks, and experienced its difficulties and rewards. Still, the denial of access to the perspectives of people who gave birth is both frustrating and tragic, and at times my narrative strains against these limits. Where it does, I am clear about the limits as I see them and explicit about my efforts to glimpse beyond.

Thinking with “Risk”

Anxieties about the possibility of a negative birth outcome, paired with the emphasis on childbearing as a woman’s life purpose, her telos, make risk an especially useful analytic—even if it does not precisely translate any single term from Greek or Latin. Still, this does not mean it did not *exist* in Roman culture—indeed, “risk,” when carefully defined, can help us see how Romans linked certain ideas and practices in ways that are otherwise hard to identify. In this book, I use “risk” as a shorthand for the possibility of a particular outcome in circumstances where a result is unknowable in advance and (often) the stakes are high. It can encompass “danger,” “hazard,” and “peril” (*periculum* in Latin, *kindunos* in Greek), but is frequently expressed obliquely as the object of anticipatory affects including fear and hope. In this regard, “risk” often has a negative valence, but it is ultimately a “value-neutral concept,” as Cam Grey argues, “that entails the potential for both beneficial and detrimental outcomes.”²¹ Risk is also a verb (like “mother,” as Sarah Knott would point out), implicating practices or a course of action in pursuit of a goal, distinguishing it from the more bland semantic range of “uncertainty.”²² Rather than grounding my definition in probabilistic reasoning, my usage resembles invocations of “risk” (as a verb or noun) or “risky” in colloquial speech, frequently used to express a combination of (high) stakes and an uncertain outcome.²³ In sum, this book seeks out responses to a range of concerns evoked by “birth risks” or “cultures of risk” that emerge in the language and thought-worlds of historical actors.²⁴

20. Dasen 2015.

21. Grey 2020, 21.

22. Knott 2019.

23. E.g., the *OED*’s *first* definition, emphasizing potential loss: “(Exposure to) the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance; a chance or situation involving such a possibility.” The second definition turns to risk as “a quantifiable factor.”

24. Toner 2013 (esp. 87–107, defining “risk” at 94–97) uses “culture of risk,” as does Grey 2020 (at 21, “We can imagine a complex collection of cultural, ideological, and behavioral

The figure of Fortuna, the personification of luck and chance, captures key features of this configuration in Roman terms, through a variable, gendered iconography. A popular household deity and vehicle for imperial propaganda, Fortuna took many forms; two of her most common attributes, however, were a cornucopia, symbolizing agricultural fertility, and a rudder for steering events, alluding to the benefits and perils of seafaring. She is also commonly invoked as the cause of life’s unexpected ups and downs. The interplay of danger and gain, conjured by agricultural and maritime imagery, emerges in sources from dream interpretation to Latin poetry. Dovetailing with Bianchi’s claims about “the feminine symptom,” I argue that Fortuna’s emphatic femaleness also serves as a reminder that risk was, in effect, gendered.

By focalizing childbirth, this book also seeks to open a new chapter in the history of risk in Greek and Roman cultures. With some notable exceptions (including Esther Eidinow, see below), ancient historians have often traced “risk” through discussions of (agricultural) subsistence and maritime activity. Take, for example, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s monumental *The Corrupting Sea* and Thomas Gallant’s *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece*.²⁵ Transmarine loans have garnered scholarly interest as a kind of proto-insurance (or not) in debates that began among scholars including Moses Finley and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix.²⁶ (In these contexts, risk, though central, is construed rather differently from my definition.) This should come as no surprise: as Jerry Toner points out, these domains were central to basic survival for many vulnerable members of society.²⁷ It is no accident they persisted, practically and figuratively, as dominant sites of anxiety about the fragility of human communities. Chapter 2, in particular, subtly engages this scholarly history by examining the pervasiveness of these spheres as figurative sites for the construction of risk *generally* and birth risk *specifically*. As such, I argue that birth offers a unique way into Roman “cultures of risk,” scaling from individual bodies to the empire at large, in part through its connections to these spheres.

My approach takes some inspiration from Mary Douglas’s cultural theory of risk, a soft-constructionist theory developed to explain the selection of and responses to dangers in any society. (In this regard, the present study might

characteristics combining with infrastructural, technological, and structural elements to produce a given society’s ‘culture of risk’”).

25. Horden and Purcell 2000; Gallant 1991.

26. de Ste. Croix 1974; Finley 1999; focusing on Greek evidence exclusively, see, e.g., Millett 1983, 1991; Reed 2003.

27. Toner 2013, 97–107 (“Marine Gladiators” and “The Power of Luck”), selecting seafaring as a (if not *the*) key locus to explore Roman approaches to risk, in relation to agricultural volatility (at 101).

also be read alongside Eidinow's *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks*, which models its theoretical approach on Douglas.)²⁸ While their focus is presentist, Douglas and coauthor Aaron Wildavsky leave room for historians of premodern societies in *Risk and Culture*:

The cultural theory of risk perception . . . sees the social environment, the selection principles, and the perceiving subject as all one system. It does not ignore the reality of the dangers around. Plenty of real dangers are always present. No doubt the water in fourteenth century Europe was a persistent health hazard, but a cultural theory of perception would point out that it became a public preoccupation only when it seemed plausible to accuse Jews of poisoning the wells. A cultural approach can make us see how community consensus relates some natural dangers to moral defects. *According to this argument, dangers are selected for public concern according to the strength and direction of social criticism.*²⁹

Risk, from this perspective, can also serve as a heuristic to describe the possibilities and causes of positive or negative outcomes as they emerge from and reinforce what people value and fear most (again, “cultures of risk”). By thinking about risk in a similar framework—as fundamentally bound up with perception, affect, and hierarchy—I thus avoid the notion of “objective” versus “subjective” risk, which often relies on false dichotomies.³⁰

Douglas and Wildavsky's cultural theory approach opened them to critiques that highlight some key problems, as well as possibilities, in the academic study of the concept. Arjun Appadurai, for example, argues that Douglas's work on risk suffers from its reliance on taxonomies from her earlier work (especially those in conversation with Mauss and Durkheim), resulting in an inadequate treatment of probabilistic reasoning as a feature of risk in contemporary capitalism. Appadurai instead distinguishes “risk” from “uncertainty,” drawing on the work of Frank H. Knight, for whom “risk” involves probability distributions.³¹ This critique and distinction helps flesh out Appadurai's conceptual approach to futurity and probability, which ultimately decenters western, teleological “trajectorism,” instead promoting what he calls an “ethics of

28. Eidinow 2007; see also Eidinow 2011.

29. Douglas and Wildavsky 1983, 7 (italics mine).

30. While Grey 2020 and I both see perception as essential to “cultures of risk,” we differ in our comfort with the notion of “objective” risk; Grey identifies differentials of risk perception among groups “and the grey area between any individual or group's perceived risk and its objective risk, as entailing a mechanism for measuring a society's vulnerability” (21–22).

31. Appadurai 2013, 294–95, on Douglas and Wildavsky 1983; on Knightian risk versus uncertainty, Appadurai 2013, 233–52, esp. 238–39.

possibility . . . those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” that level the playing field in “the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship.” The capacity to hope, to aspire, “is not evenly distributed in any society.”³² I am sensitive to Appadurai’s perspective and see in it elements that speak to the study at hand—which will emerge across the pages to come—but under a rather different set of historical circumstances.

Contemporary risk theorists often emphasize a radical break between late modernity and prior eras, in many ways a position I share, but one that can also obscure generative points of convergence. “Risk society” theorists, most notably Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, see the snowballing of risk analysis and prevention as a defining feature of late capitalism and globalization. The proliferation and diffusion of risk is both a response to and cause of further pollution, inequality, and environmental degradation (not-so-“natural” disasters). Beck’s work emphasizes the interconnectedness of people and the porosity of boundaries in globalized risk society; the very nature and fragmentation of risk society also means that responsibility is diffused—that is, one can always blame someone/something else. Blame can be directed toward institutions, companies, and powerful individuals, unlike in premodern societies, Beck argues, where disasters could be attributed to the supernatural, to “demons or acts of God.”³³ In this model, risk is inherently modern, “danger” or “hazard” preindustrial or premodern. These sedimented concepts inscribe modern, western biases, requiring constant interrogation, as scholars including Greg Bankoff have emphasized—an inspiration to interrogate our *own* biases as we try to understand ancient cultures too.³⁴

Many people living under the Roman empire included gods in their explanatory frameworks (as do many people today!), but divine wrath and intervention were far from the only causal accounts, as this book demonstrates. In the five chapters that follow, I seek to show how individuals drew on a variety of strategies and technologies (and mixed and matched) to plan and imagine their futures in all their specificity and multiplicity.³⁵ Romans coped with giving birth—a routine but potentially hazardous process, with a lifetime of ramifications for parent and child—by deploying a range of approaches that varied

32. Appadurai 2013, 295, 188.

33. Lupton 1999a, 84.

34. See, e.g., U. Beck 1992; Giddens 1999; also Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994, on “reflexive modernity.” On western bias, see, e.g., Bankoff 2003 (esp. chapter 1, “Vulnerability as a Western Discourse”), focusing on the Philippines and arguing that concepts of “natural disaster” and vulnerability reinscribe “a knowledge system formed from within a dominant western liberal consciousness” (at 17); cf. Grey 2020, 12, building on this argument, but in a study of late ancient Italy.

35. Thanks to Duncan MacRae for sharing his research on “Roman futures”; cf. Shaw 2019.

from mechanistic to theological, that entailed both universal and entirely local, personal concerns. This book offers one model for how we might fit these approaches together.

With all these caveats, I invite ancient historians to engage with continuities between risk society theorists' ideas about late modernity and the historical worldviews explored in this book. Take, for example, Beck's emphasis on the diffusion of risk and responsibility: in a globalized economy, agreements must be upheld across international lines because actions in one place can affect another, often in the form of pollution and disease—a lesson with which we continue to struggle. As more and more factors are taken into account in risk analyses, a vision of global causality emerges that actually shares key features with some prestatistical worldviews. To a certain extent, this idea of risk entanglement resembles visions of a cosmic web that emerge in Greek and Latin sources (especially under the influence of Stoic cosmology), where distant forces can interact to produce particular outcomes—or engender particular risks. Indeed, Beck's description of modern, globalized connectivity has more in common with ancient ideas about the interconnectedness of the universe than would initially meet the eye—how plants, animals, humans, and the stars are bound together through forces such as cosmic sympathy.³⁶

Childbearing's *figurative* connections to other spheres of life are encoded in metaphorical language and imagery (including agriculture or seafaring), not least because of the need to reach for what is known to grapple with what is unknown or unseen. Sometimes these links are much more than metaphors, as when childbearing and its risks are expressed in the language of economic value. I mean this not only in the sense that childbearing was integral to a woman's social—and if enslaved, monetary—value, but that birth was part of a system of signification that encompassed economic language. For example, the word for interest (on a loan) and childbearing/offspring are the same in Greek (*tokos*), mirrored in the Latin etymological connection between *faenus* (interest) and *fetus* (offspring), a fact that suggests the riskiness of childbearing and financial loans were mutually constitutive. Cicero elaborates this connection, meditating on untimely death, especially among infants: nature “has given the use of life as if on loan, without any fixed term”; sometimes she calls it in early.³⁷ The metaphor can take on more complex forms, including a disturbing—and on the surface, baffling—late ancient joke, involving a loan with repayment

36. On sympathy, Holmes forthcoming. I reflect on similar matters in Freidin 2020b and chapter 4.

37. Cic., *Tusc.* 1.93: *dedit usuram vitae tamquam pecuniae nulla praestituta die*. The Latin puns on *usura* as “use” and “loan” (also meaning “interest” or “usury”).

including child-size cinerary urns.³⁸ The relationship between parent and child, too, is sometimes described in financial language—of loans, interest, and returns.³⁹ In Roman law, the “risk” a lender takes on, *periculum* (or the *periculi pretium*), entailed the sense of entitlement to a return (e.g., *Dig.* 22.2.5), seemingly analogous to the devotion or filial piety a Roman parent or guardian might seek in recompense for the effort of child-rearing.⁴⁰

This language was part of an “affective economy,” to quote Sara Ahmed, that expressed and shaped the anticipation and precarity of childbearing, in a world where perhaps one in three infants perished before their fifth birthday.⁴¹ I bring this up neither to link (ancient) Roman views of childbearing to (modern) ideas of quantified risk, nor to suggest that Romans universally viewed child-rearing as an investment (although some people certainly did, to varying degrees). Rather, anticipatory affects undergird these associations. Take hope: *elpis* in Greek and *spes* in Latin are more expansive than their English counterpart, sometimes indicating a neutral or even negative disposition, from expectation or anticipation to desire and apprehension. In legal contexts, the unborn can be protected by *spes nascendi* (roughly, “the hope of birth”), which may safeguard a father’s interests and thereby link childbearing to (future) property claims. On tombstones, hope is highly charged, as parents lament its dissipation with their child’s death.⁴² Hope “circulate[s] between bodies and signs,” as Ahmed has argued of emotions in general, elaborating an economic metaphor. Particular affects may “stick” to signs and “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space.” Hope can also slide into fear, as circumstances change: Seneca put it simply, “fear follows hope” (*spem metus sequitur*). These movements underlie the emotional economy of preparing for and giving birth, within a network made up of human and nonhuman actors—from the earthly and mundane to the celestial—who serve as its nodes.⁴³

In the chapters that follow, I paint a portrait of this thick, complex world: risks both emerge from and are managed through relationships among people and their enmeshment with a nonhuman environment. Risk and affect are

38. *Philogelos* 50, with discussion at Candy 2019, 69–70.

39. E.g., Plut., *De Amore Proliis* 495B (see chapter 2).

40. MacCormack 1979a; 1979b (legal significance of *periculum*).

41. On infant mortality, chapter 1. Ahmed 2004 (“Affective Economies”); on anticipation as an “affective state,” Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009 (in conversation with Ahmed at 249).

42. Sanna 2012, also Bartošek 1949 (on *spes* in law, esp. *spes nascendi*); *spes* on children’s tombstones, see, e.g., *CIL* 11, 531 = *CLE* 1170 = Barresi 2018, no. 117 (discussed in chapter 5).

43. Sen., *Ep.* 5.7–8; cf. Cic., *Tusc.* 4.80. Ahmed 2004, 119 (“circulate”), 121 (“nodal point”), 125 (“slide”). On Greek/Roman “hope,” see Kazantzidis and Spatharas 2018a. For wide-ranging treatments of emotion, see Chaniotis and Ducrey 2012, 2013; Chaniotis 2021.

mutually reinforcing, circulating around and through one another; this is what Deborah Lupton has described as an “emotion-risk” assemblage.⁴⁴ The book’s chapters build in successive layers to demonstrate this process, from constructions of value as extracted from the “matter of the mother” to social entanglements, institutions, and divine-human networks. Let us now turn to the question of how these elements emerge in the pages to come.

The Path Ahead

As much as this book is about childbearing and human responses to risk, it is also about scale. Quotidian and extraordinary, entirely individual and universal (we are all *born*), birth is the gateway to everything that comes next. It was seen by many Romans as intimately connected to life’s unfolding, a person’s location in social and cosmic systems, and ultimately, their death. By examining a range of discourses, each chapter approaches childbirth from a different scalar perspective to demonstrate the integration of risk and response in a wider context, from Roman political culture to perceptions of human fortune and destiny. This is crucial to achieving a multilayered understanding of childbearing as central to visions of hierarchy, stability, and continuity, as well as threats to these concepts—and as a deeply personal, embodied process. Childbirth was a focal point for hope and anxiety about the perpetuation of a culture in the face of unpredictable circumstances, of survival and the possibility for human flourishing.

This thematic commitment organizes the first chapter, “Veturia at Scale: Kinship, Community, and Empire.” As the title suggests, it moves from the infinite specificity of one woman’s story to her embeddedness in an empire’s story. The chapter blends empirical microhistory and informed speculation—a commitment that runs through the book; I am inspired by scholars including Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes, but I approach their innovations with acute awareness of the differences in our archives and position in relation to our historical subjects.⁴⁵ In the chapter, I explore how women’s generative bodies both resisted and were co-opted in the Roman imperial project, an idea with both literal and figurative instantiations, deeply affected by status and entitlement.⁴⁶ Beyond her

44. Lupton 2013; also Lupton 1999b, 2012.

45. Hartman 2008 (“critical fabulation”); Fuentes 2016. After formulating my own approach, I encountered Sivan 2018, 267–376: fictional “autobiographies” with accompanying scholarly essays, exploring the lives of Jewish children in the Roman world. When I began this project as a dissertation, Ulrich 1990 was also an inspiration.

46. A critical kinship studies lens is helpful, e.g., Riggs and Peel 2016, 38: “Given the range of differing qualifications of what properly constitutes the human, it is more correct to note that although some women are *expected* to reproduce, other women are not, and others may well be

reproductive difficulties, Veturia’s life and death also come into focus from a very different perspective, through pressures exerted by demographic patterns at the level of the population. The chapter thus models entangled layers of the generative imperative, as some people did or did *not* become mothers—a transformation that took on meaning within networks of kinship, community, and political ideology. For readers unfamiliar with Roman history—and specifically histories of the Roman “family”—this chapter provides vital background that will be helpful in navigating the remainder of the book. Experts will find much that is familiar, but the chapter rewards engagement for its treatment of nested scales and the foundation it provides for the rest of the book.

The ways people imagined the hidden processes of gestation and birth also implicate scale, connecting risks within the individual body (in this case, girls’ and women’s pregnant or birthing bodies) to more visible forms of risk. Pregnancy is a state of anticipation, and childbirth, a process of rupture, as the hiddenness of gestation gives way to the visible. Chapter 2 (“Cornucopia and Rudder: Imagining Generation, Embodying Risk”) examines how the risks of childbearing were understood using language and imagery drawn from the agricultural and maritime spheres. These metaphors and analogies helped individuals “see” the unseen—while their limitations present their own fruitful interpretive possibilities. Vital to these domains is the generative “fluid economy,” an idea that was central to constructions of women’s bodies, as the system that regulates menstruation and forms and conveys nutriment to fetuses and infants.⁴⁷ Fortuna, often portrayed with her signature cornucopia and rudder in imperial iconography (evoking precisely the agricultural and maritime spheres), gave form to Roman ideas about luck, chance, and risk and reveals how such ideas were gendered. Appeals to the god reinforced perceptions of *value* as a primary feature of childbearing. The very notion of “value,” which runs through the chapter, also raises a host of questions about childbearing, status, and especially enslavement, which entails the quantification of human value—ideas I explore in conversation with scholars including Katharine Huemoeller and Jennifer Morgan.⁴⁸

prohibited from reproducing or penalized for their reproduction. . . . Therefore, we can see here how ‘entitlement’ to reproduce, and pronatalist abrogation for those who do not is strongly affected by an assemblage of subject positions.”

47. Other scholars use similar terminology; see, e.g., Flemming 2021; on bodily fluids more generally, Bradley, Leonard, and Totelin 2021.

48. J. L. Morgan 2004, 2018; Huemoeller 2016, the dissertation on which her forthcoming monograph is based.

The third chapter, “Bodily and Social Order in Soranus’s *Gynecology*,” turns to the relationship between physician and his construction of a female patient in the service of a proto-eugenic vision—one that implicates a view of nature as inherently harsh in relation to individual, generative bodies. Soranus’s *Gynecology* (first/second century CE) is our most detailed written work on childbearing in the Roman empire, a text designed to help elite men sire better babies (like farmers pursuing better crops, the author contends). In doing so, Soranus presents himself as an expert who can strengthen the ruling elite, in a hierarchy of human *value*. While elite men who read his work unequivocally stand to benefit from his expertise, the case is more complicated for the women about whom he writes. At the heart of the work is a notion of procreation as *natural* but not *healthy* for women, a necessary process that inherently puts their bodies at risk. The *Gynecology* deploys a range of analogies to illustrate these dynamics, drawn from the agricultural and botanical sphere, articulating a version of the fluid economy outlined in the previous chapter. Soranus positions himself and physicians like him as necessary mediators between women and a less-than-benevolent nature. A particular form of patriarchal expertise thus emerges as the answer to the risks inherent in childbearing.

In the fourth chapter (“Technologies of Hope: Amulets, Materiality, and Affect”), a divergent view of nature emerges from evidence for amulets used during pregnancy and childbirth, one that foregrounds their “animacy.”⁴⁹ Through analysis of engraved gems (perhaps some of our best evidence for women’s self-care) in concert with literary sources that prescribe their use, I argue that amulets were “technologies of hope,” drawing together human/nonhuman communities to mediate the risks of pregnancy and birth. Hope adheres to certain objects, is even materialized or enacted in the form and usage of objects that bring humans into contact with other, powerful agencies in their midst. Amulets, in other words, materialize human relations with nonhuman agencies, but also within hierarchical, human communities. They present a networked way of dealing with uncertainty by engaging diverse agencies, and through this relationality, provoke both affect and effect. This is accomplished in part through amulets’ manipulation of scale—through their symbolic logic, imagery, and very materiality. Their often diminutive size provokes a kind of numinous intimacy (this is the power of miniaturization), connecting hidden processes and organs to a divine realm.

And what happened when hopes were dashed, when people’s best efforts were met by failure and loss? The final chapter, “Fate and Fortune: Living with Uncertainty, Understanding Loss,” argues that relations between humans and

49. Chen 2012 (*Animacies*).

gods, or humans and powerful nonhuman forces or entities in the environment (often coextensive with divinity), participated in a discourse of causality and responsibility that helped to spread and diffuse blame among human actors. As the previous chapters demonstrate, however, divine causation was only one in a complex of explanations people could muster in the face of loss, in effect spreading responsibility. Strategies such as vows performed a similar function to the amulets, enlarging the network of support—and responsibility—in the face of danger. In this context, responses to untimely death can teach us a great deal about birth, given prevailing ideas about the Fates/fate and astrological determinism, as a person’s death is set at their birth. Indeed, many epitaphs excoriate the Fates/fate for this reason. Drawing primarily on Latin epigraphy and funerary art, these dynamics come into focus through a study of vows (in response to happy outcomes) and (alternatively) expressions of loss, which take us back to the significance of Fortuna/*fortuna*. Rather than suggesting two divergent ideas about the course of events rooted in chance versus determinism, Fortuna and the Fates—who sometimes appear together in funerary epigraphy—evoke complementary postures toward the future and the scope of human responsibility and agency. Together, they reveal how birth (for better or for worse) was central to defining a person’s place in the empire and cosmos.

Romans, You, and Me

From one angle, it would seem this is a book about cultures very different from our own. And it is. But before plunging into the rich history evoked by Veturia’s epitaph in chapter 1, I want to observe some important thematic connections between Roman affective worlds and our own, especially through postures of *anticipation*. Writing in 2009, Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele Clarke argued that anticipation was characteristic of the present—tied to hope, but also fear, surprise, or anxiety. Modern biomedicine, they offered by way of example, particularized reproduction into “micrological substrates,” where futures are optimized at the level of “cells, DNA, and endocrinology,” shaped by “anticipatory logics”—the ratcheted-up, hypermedicalized experience of reproduction in late capitalism.⁵⁰ Several dimensions characterize anticipation in their view, including *injunction* (“the moral imperative to characterize and inhabit states of uncertainty”), *optimization* (“as the moral responsibility of citizens to secure their ‘best possible futures’”) and *preparedness* (“as living in ‘preparation for’ potential trauma”). In different idioms, these three dimensions would have been deeply, painfully familiar to

50. Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 252.

the historical actors who populate the pages of this book, many of whom experienced the pressures of the generative imperative (and its status-based logics) and lived with the knowledge of their young children's precarious mortality. Childbearing can offer parents a window to imagine better futures, whether optimization occurs through radical, biomedical intervention or through Roman vows and the strict regimen prescribed by an ancient Greek doctor. Thinking about Romans also entails thinking about ourselves—not as part of an exercise in facile transhistorical comparison, but rather as part of the reflexive process of historical thinking.

Writing ethical history requires taking care: caring for the subjects under scrutiny, for the nuances, subtleties, gaps, and contradictions in our sources, for our readers, for ourselves. Part of this process also necessitates thinking deeply about the ways my position and present circumstances inform my perspective and the questions I ask. As you read these pages, I invite you to do the same. It is precisely this ethics of care, this self-reflexive engagement, that emboldens me to do some of the more speculative work in the chapters that follow. At the same time, there is no doubt my own limitations, as well as those inherent to the academic discourse of history, constrain my narrative. Despite these shortcomings—or rather, because of them—this book is intended to spur the reader's imagination, to invite you to consider the possibilities and limits of our capacity to envision Roman worlds, and how those visions provoke renewed reflection on our own.

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