

Athens Greek Religion Seminar, June 13 2017:

Polyxeni Strolonga: *The Intersection of Religion and Medicine: Epidaurian iamata and Delphic Oracles on Having Children*

Male anxieties relating to infertility inform a significant body of questions addressed to the Oracle at Delphi (Fontenrose 1978, 443). For example, a male questioner asks the oracle how he will have children (Q104); another petitioner states his desire for children (Q160), while another declares his lack of offspring (L23). Even though the oracle's responses to these questions vary, they all seem to "heal" presumed male infertility by promising, predicting and even "generating" progeny, either literally (most often outside the current wedlock (L4, L5, L82)), or metaphorically (through the foundation of a colony (Q28), or a victory in athletic contests (Q160)). By contrast, female infertility, as it is apparent in the Hippocratic corpus and to an extent in the inscriptions at Epidauros, is treated as a physiological problem requiring medical treatment and physical intervention.

In this paper I explore the intersection between religion and medicine with respect to the problem of infertility. By studying the two corpora, the Epidaurian *iamata* and the Delphic oracles, I investigate the responses that are provided to petitioners and patients alike who cannot have children. The healing is achieved through a religious approach to a medical problem, although the experience of the sterile differs significantly, since they receive, what I call, gendered healing; the male petitioners at Delphi are treated differently from the female patients at Epidauros. For example, most Delphic oracles predict that progeny will be achieved after the male petitioner changes his partner. Thus, the Delphic Oracle treats infertility as a social problem, not as a reproductive impairment that needs physical remedy, reflecting social biases and gender stereotypes according to which only women are to blame for sterility. Through this comparison between the Delphic oracles and the *iamata* I show that these biases about female infertility remain consistent whether the treatment of infertility is achieved at Delphi or at Epidauros, by means of prophecies or incubations, with the aid of Apollo or Asclepius.

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