

BOOK REVIEW

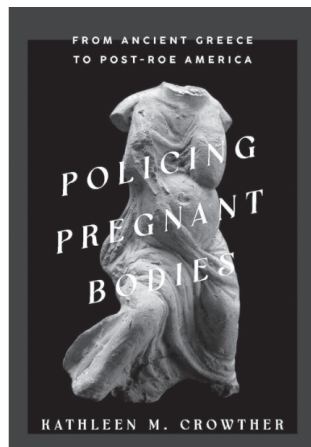
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Policing Pregnant Bodies: From Ancient Greece to Post-Roe America

Kathleen M. Crowther

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023



Kathleen M. Crowther could have easily called her sweeping history of reproductive control *Regulating Reproductive Bodies* and still kept the alliterative flair. But even just with the book's title emblazoned on its cover and spine, the University of

Oklahoma historian of science and medicine delivers a bold and clear-eyed historical argument. Since ancient times, pregnant bodies have indeed been policed—by the law, by medical authorities, and even by women themselves. *Policing Pregnant Bodies: From Ancient Greece to Post-Roe America* traces how and why, and ultimately what these deeply rooted contests over the reproductive body might suggest about current and future struggles for reproductive rights.

As Crowther explains rather poetically in her Introduction, “A great deal of what we know or think we know about procreation owes more to ancient religion and philosophy than it does to modern science.” To help us fully understand that reality, she encourages readers to “imagine a very old tree with very deep roots.” In this metaphor, “the latest scientific understanding of procreation is like the newest green shoots on that tree.” These new shoots, our modern science, are of course “connected to a much vaster and older set of ideas, and these ideas continue to influence the way we think about fetuses and the very way we treat pregnant people.” (p. 1-2) This explanation sets the stage for the rest of the book, which

follows ideas about pregnancy and fetal development on an odyssey through time and space until arriving at our current moment.

For covering so much chronological and thematic ground, Crowther's book consists of an accessible five chapters that move the reader easily from ancient to modern. In Chapter 1, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Crowther compellingly links contemporary “heartbeat bills” and (often scientifically misguided) pro-life fixations with fetal heart rate detection to long forgotten but lingering beliefs inherited from Ancient Greek philosophy and medicine. Readers may not necessarily think of Aristotle or William Harvey when puzzling over contemporary abortion policy, but Crowther points out their obvious roles in building something as obvious as the architecture of our medical beliefs about the heart.

Chapter 2, “The Fetus in the Bottle,” takes on the surprisingly deeply rooted assumptions of embryology and fetal development as distinct from the conditions of pregnancy, a sort of reproductive mind-body dualism that has been with us in some form since antiquity. Why do even today so many women feel surprised by changes in their body during pregnancy, and why do they feel like no one really prepares them for it? The answer, laid out in this chapter, has to do with ancient and early modern approaches to understanding the body and the surprising role of dissection in the building of that knowledge.

Chapter 3 takes us inside “The Dangerous Womb.” Rather than assuming the womb is a hospitable and nurturing place for a pregnancy to develop, historical actors throughout Crowther's story have instead imagined it as a dangerous and threatening environment. There were myriad ways a pregnant woman (anatomically) could harm a growing fetus, from maternal impressions based on improper behavior to maternal-fetal disease transmission to miscarriage. Even normal pregnancy could be a minefield of guilt.

In Chapter 4, “The Secrets of Women”—in my opinion the strongest and most important chapter



of the book—Crowther expands on the miscarriage thread. There she explores the commonness of miscarriage, as well as the common tendency to (surprise) blame the pregnant woman for it. But the chapter explores broader questions too, like how have women even understood themselves to be pregnant, and at what point? What did “quickening” mean, really?

Finally, the book culminates in Chapter 5, “Abortion and the Fetus.” Here Crowther gets to the heart of what the book’s and previous chapter’s framing has been hinting at: How have women ended pregnancies throughout history, and how have medical authorities across time dealt with that? She pulls anecdotes from ancient Greece, medieval

them. Our modern concerns over pregnancy outcomes are both ancient and, in some ways, timeless.

Anyone seeking a deeper history and more nuanced understanding of reproductive health politics would do well to seek out *Policing Pregnant Bodies*. Crowther’s book serves both as a necessary refocusing on ancient and early modern histories for those of us who write in strictly a twentieth (or twenty-first) century context, as well as an accessible introduction to the broader history of reproduction.

About the Author

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AS CROWTHER EXPLAINS RATHER POETICALLY IN HER INTRODUCTION, “A GREAT DEAL OF WHAT WE KNOW OR THINK WE KNOW ABOUT PROCREATION OWES MORE TO ANCIENT RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY THAN IT DOES TO MODERN SCIENCE.” TO HELP US FULLY UNDERSTAND THAT REALITY, SHE ENCOURAGES READERS TO “IMAGINE A VERY OLD TREE WITH VERY DEEP ROOTS.”

Ireland, and the nineteenth century US to illustrate her story. In all cases we see both women’s agency and the use of various substances known in folk healing to induce miscarriages or abortions. After a tidy conclusion, Crowther includes a handy guide to further reading at the end for anyone hoping to dive deeper into any of the major topics covered by her chapters.

While *JMR* readers may instinctively want to grasp for more obvious contemporary policy and regulatory implications (especially since she interweaves modern news stories so effectively), Crowther’s brilliant tactic here is to cut all the way down to the fundamental assumptions underlying