Uxoricide in Pregnancy: Ancient Greek Domestic Violence in Evolutionary Perspective

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Abstract: Previous studies of ancient Greek examples of uxoricide in pregnancy have concluded that the theme is used to suggest tyrannical abuse of power and that the violence is a product of the patriarchal nature of ancient society. This article uses evolutionary analyses of violence during pregnancy to argue that the themes of sexual jealousy and uncertainty over paternity are as crucial as the theme of power to an understanding of these examples and that the examples can be seen as typical instances of spousal abuse as it occurs in all types of society.

Keywords: domestic violence, sexual jealousy, sexual proprietariness, uxoricide

Introduction

This article explores a set of examples from ancient Greek sources in which a man attacks his intimate partner while she is pregnant. By bringing together these instances of vicious and often fatal assaults, we explore what it is that prompts such extreme violence by ancient males towards their pregnant spouses. We contextualize the ancient sources in relation to research by evolutionary psychologists into intimate partner violence in general, and into intimate partner violence during pregnancy in particular. We apply to the evidence the argument of Wilson and Daly (1996, 1998) that violence against women can be understood as a systematic consequence of the evolved organization of the human male mind. These ancient depictions of uxoricide have been viewed by classical scholars as typifying excess power in the hands of tyrants and gods. However, we argue that the depictions in Greek literary culture are refractions of both historical and mythological examples and are representative of men who fear a lack of power in their spousal relationship and a lack of control over their partner's sexuality and reproductive resources.

The article contributes to the movement towards consilience between the sciences and humanities advocated by Carroll and others (Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger,
Uxoricide in pregnancy

2012; Slingerland and Collard, 2012). It also contributes to the debates between the cultural studies model of learned behavior and the evolutionary model of genetic adaptations (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby, 1992; Gavey, 2005), and between the feminist turn away from the biologization of human behavior (Omitowoju, 2002, pp. 6–10) and the rebiologization of the same advocated by evolutionary psychologists (Hrdy, 1981, pp. 1–2). It also forms part of a wider body of work, which is starting to break new ground in the study of the ancient world by exploring how the evidence matches cross-cultural behavioral patterns. Scholars in fields other than classics, including anthropology and psychology, have considered ancient sources in elucidating evolutionary histories of monogamy and polygyny (Betzig, 1986, 1992; MacDonald, 1995). Their arguments use evolutionary perspectives to demonstrate how access to greater reproductive opportunities underlies power battles in human history. More recently, classicists have begun to use evolutionary psychology to explain ancient texts, although the field remains informed by the cultural determinist premise that all significant features of a culture are products of culture-specific conditions (Cairns, 2003, pp. 11–12; Gottschall and Wilson, 2005, p. xix), an approach that dates back to Franz Boas. Cairns argues instead that a combined evolutionary and cultural approach is needed to understand Homeric anger fully because there are points of overlap between all cultures “formed and inhabited by a species which evolved its capacity for the creation of culture under a broadly uniform set of environmental pressures” (p. 12), while at the same time there are cultural differences in expectations about the appropriateness of showing a particular emotion (p. 13; cf. McHardy, 2008b, p. 120). We concur with his view that the biological versus cultural antithesis is a false one.

This article also follows on from the work of Gottschall (2008) and McHardy (2008b) which explores why men are violent towards each other in ancient Greek literature. They conclude that the intense competition over female reproductive resources is represented as central to the understanding of male-on-male violence in Greek literary sources. Both scholars argue that the acquisition of wealth, power and status gain their significance in the sources because they help to provide greater access to female reproductive resources. Scheidel’s (2009) article on ancient imperial systems draws similar conclusions. By using evolutionary theory to analyze a wide range of ancient data, Scheidel argues that, in each empire, “regardless of their marriage customs and constitutional properties, the appropriation of resources facilitate reproductive success” (p. 204).

All these scholars have demonstrated the centrality of female reproductive resources to males and the risks it is worth running to attain them, including fatal violence. What is it, then, that motivates certain men, including ancient Greek men, to kill their own intimate partners when they are pregnant? The present article looks at representations of lethal male-on-female violence in Greek literary sources in order to address this question. The examples we consider are mythical and anecdotal ones reflecting male fears and anxieties that grow out of the vital struggle over female reproductive resources.

Materials and Methods

Wilson and Daly (1998, pp. 199–200; cf. Wilson, Daly, and Wright, 1993) have made the case that, despite variation in levels of intimate partner violence across cultures,
Uxoricide in pregnancy

and in its acceptability within different societies, there is considerable cross-cultural consistency in purported motivating factors. The reason they cite for the male desire for control over a sexual partner is related to perceived male-male competition for women. The resulting “sexual proprietoriness” can generate spousal violence that is intended to constrain female autonomy. Building on the work of Wilson and Daly, Goetz (2008) suggests that the root of intimate partner violence is uncertainty over paternity (cf. Brownridge et al., 2011, p. 861). The fear of cuckoldry creates a perceived need on the part of a male partner to mount a fierce guard over his wife to ensure that she does not get pregnant by another man (Burch and Gallup, 2004). This kind of mate guarding can be conceived of as paternity guarding as the men fear that the women are trying to trick them and are seeking to be unfaithful. It is possible that the male mind has come to be hypersensitive to cues of an intimate partner’s sexual infidelity, causing some excessive reactions to slight suspicions of unfaithfulness because it is so costly to an individual to expend his resources unknowingly raising another man’s child (Goetz, 2008). In his analysis of Australian homicide cases, Polk (1994, p. 33) notes a high number of cases in which men who killed their partners thought they had been unfaithful, whereas family members maintained that they had not.

Those men who are particularly prone to sexual jealousy are more likely to act violently, and pregnancy can be a time where feelings of sexual jealousy are exacerbated (Brownridge et al., 2011). Pregnancy can cause some men to question the fidelity of their partner and this fear about sexual fidelity can lead to an increased risk of intimate partner violence (Bacchus, Mezey, and Bewley, 2006). Partner rape is more likely at times when a threat of a rival is perceived (Goetz, 2008, pp. 264–268), which would suggest that this is a way in which men try to ensure the paternity of their partner’s offspring. Wilson and Daly (1998) claim that women are sufficiently interested in extramarital sex to be willing to take risks to evade even possessive mates in order to gain material and/or genetic benefits (cf. Hrdy, 1981; Martin et al., 2004).

Wilson and Daly (1996, 1998) argue that male sexual proprietoriness and rivalry motivate a substantial proportion of homicides everywhere. They estimate that these killings could account for as many as half of all homicides. Case studies show that there is an increased risk of lethal violence when a woman threatens to leave or actually leaves her relationship. The inability to accept the termination of a relationship is the most significant factor leading to homicide between intimate partners in Polk’s Australian cases (Polk, 1994, Ch. 3; cf. Bacchus et al., 2006, p. 598; Mezey, 1997; Wilson et al., 1993). Wilson and Daly (1996) argue that male proprietorial behavior comes out of an aversion to women’s efforts to leave marriages, as well as to the possibility of their infidelity. Jealous men react strongly to any suggestion of sexual infidelity by their partners or to any attempts by the woman to assert control over the relationship (Goetz, 2008; Wilson and Daly, 1998). These themes appear prominently in Polk’s case studies of intimate homicide from Australia (Polk 1994, Ch. 3).

While domestic violence is common even in societies that disapprove of violence against women, uxoricide is relatively rare. Scholars have debated whether uxoricide denotes behavior that is adaptive or maladaptive (see Camilleri and Quinsey, 2012, p. 264 for an overview of the scholarship to date). Wilson et al. (1993) suggest that such killing is
an extreme by-product of proprietary views of women by men. Others have proposed an alternative hypothesis for such data. Killing an ex-partner could have functioned to exert fitness costs on rival males (Buss, 2005). Buss (2005) has also proposed that uxoricide could function directly to remedy a reputation of being a cuckold. Such a label could lower men’s status by suggesting that he lacks the ability to keep a mate and fend off rivals. Thus men might prefer to present a credible threat of violence to male rivals by demonstrating their violent potential (McHardy, 2008b, p. 48). They may also present such a threat to their women to try to control their sexual behavior. In these cases it may not be the intention of the men to kill their partners. Male desire to present a powerful and controlling front may be exacerbated by rumors surrounding pregnancy. Polk (1994) has shown that where uxoricide happens, it fits a pattern similar to non-fatal violence against women and is generated by sexual jealousy and possessiveness.

We turn now to the ancient examples that we will be considering in relation to these evolutionary interpretations of male violence towards their pregnant partners. The seventh-century BCE Corinthian tyrant, Periander, is said to have killed his pregnant wife (Diogenes Laertius 1.7), as is the sixth-century BCE Persian Great King Cambyses (Hdt. 3.31–33) and the second-century CE Athenian aristocrat Herodes (Philost. VS 555).\(^1\) The god Zeus is depicted fatally attacking his mortal partner Semele while she is pregnant with his son Dionysus (e.g., Philodemus *De Pietae* 60 Gomperz=Hes. fr. 346 MW; *P. Oxy* 30.2509; Hes. *Th.* 942; Pind. *Ol.* 2.24–26; *Pyth.*11.1; Eur. *Bacch.* 6–12; Apollod. *Bib.* 3.4.3–4.; Nonnos *Dion.* 8.413–414). Zeus is also shown attacking his pregnant partner Metis, who was either his first wife or one of the extra-marital liaisons he embarked on during his marriage to Hera (e.g., Hes. *Th.*. 886–900; Hes. fr. 343 MW; schol. bT on H. *Il.* 8.39; Apollod. *Bib.* 1.20). Zeus is also depicted practicing partner abuse on Hera in the *Iliad* (1.560–589; 15.12–23; Llewellyn-Jones, 2011, pp. 242–244; Schaps, 2006; Synodinou, 1987), but not while she is pregnant. Another god, Apollo, is depicted killing his partner Coronis while she is expecting his child in some sources, although others narrate that his sister Artemis performed the deed for him (Hes. frs. 50, 59, 60 M-W; Pind. *Pyth.* 3; *Ov. Met.* 2.542–632; Apollod. *Bib.* 3.10.3; Paus. 2.26.6; Hyg. *Fab.* 202; schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 3.52(b)). A mythological mortal, Amphitryon, is represented on some Italian pots attempting to burn to death his pregnant wife, Alceme. She is saved only by divine intervention, directed by her lover Zeus (LIMC, s.v. “Alkmene,” nos. 3–7. Burgess, 2001, p. 219). In one of the surviving ancient Greek novels, Chariton’s *Callirhoe* – possibly dating to the first century CE – Chaereas is depicted attacking his wife when she is in the very early stages of pregnancy. Although he believes he has killed her, she only appears to have died (1.4.12–1.5.1).

We treat all the evidence – which ranges from historiography and biography to mythological sources and the novel – together as manifestations of a wider behavioral pattern which encompasses all discourses in ancient Greece, including fiction, myth and history. In this respect, we build on the emerging field of biopoetics or “literary Darwinism” which uses evolutionary psychology to frame discussions of such evidence as

\(^1\) Cf. also Nero: Suetonius *Nero* 35; Tacitus *Annals* 16.6; Cassius Dio *Roman History* 62.27.
Uxoricide in pregnancy

literature, folktale, and art (e.g., Carroll et al., 2012; Gottschall and Wilson, 2005). We also build on the concept of the Greek “imaginary” as elaborated by Loraux (e.g., 1993), Kurke (1999) and others, which reads particular ways of communication as refractions of a wider set of cultural concerns. Thus we do not distinguish between, for instance, mythological sources and events with historical basis “behind” them, or between narratives centering on gods and those dealing with mortals. Greek gods are never simply humans writ large; rather, they provide vehicles for an exploration of power, control and violence (Schaps, 2006) – as did tyrants in both literary and historical renditions of them. The myths that we examine typify the depiction of ancient gods as, firstly, anthropopathic personages – that is, ones prone to human feelings – and, secondly, as fantasy figures who exceed the limitations of the human condition (Vernant, 1991).

Uxoricide is rare in ancient sources, and uxoricide in pregnancy is rarer still. There is very little evidence to indicate how frequent an occurrence uxoricide in pregnancy was. Scholars have viewed it as a rare event and an extreme version of everyday domestic abuse that existed in ancient society (Pomeroy, 2007; Schaps, 2006). Ancient legal evidence suggests that husbands were expected to prosecute someone for attacking or hurting their pregnant wives (Parca, 2002; Veyne, 1992, p. 460; cf. Exodus 21: 22–25; Josephus Ant. 4.278; Collins, 1993; Isser, 1990) and this evidence reveals that the norm would be for a husband to act protectively towards his pregnant wife. A woman killed by her husband in such circumstances would need to rely on her natal kin, especially her father or brothers to prosecute (Pomeroy, 2007). However, rather than reading these few examples as evidence of a typical practice of ancient men, or as an indication of a lack of such practice among ordinary men, we see the myths and anecdotes as reflecting male anxieties about female power over reproduction. In the examples we discuss, female sexual fidelity is shown to be something that even gods cannot control in myth and is believed to be a thing even tyrants cannot control in real life. The examples are few, but the recurrence of these stories throughout antiquity shows the consistency of this preoccupation and fear – worries which evolutionary psychologists have shown to be present in other cultures and times.

As well as following in the footsteps of those who have applied evolutionary psychology to classical research, we are building on the work of classicists who have written previously on the topic of uxoricide in the ancient world. There have been two key focuses in this work, both of which seek to explain the acts in relation to conditions specific to ancient culture. One focus has been on the tyrannical status and/or disposition of the perpetrators. In a brief survey of the historical instances where a pregnant wife is kicked to death, Mayer (1982) and Ameling (1986) suggest, following Fraenkel (RE, Suppl. VI 625, 27–39), that the theme is a topos associated with tyrants, which is used to discredit those involved for political reasons (cf. Pomeroy, 2007, p. 219). Scourfield (2003, p. 171) notes the similarity between the story of Periander and the description of Chaereas’ attack on Callirhoe in Chariton’s novel and comments that Chaereas has thus been cast in the role of “cruel tyrant” (see also Hunter, 1994, p. 1080). He argues that Chariton intends the episode to illustrate the need to control one’s passions and avoid such excessive levels of violence (Scourfield, 2003, p. 172). He further argues that the goddess Aphrodite is seen to censure domestic violence in the novel. Scourfield stresses that violent rage and potentially lethal attacks on pregnant women are associated with men who display excessive passions and
emotions, especially anger and jealousy. These themes are also explored by Fantham (1986), who emphasizes the lack of accounts of jealous violence against wives in the sources, arguing that these attacks are more readily associated with lovers. She draws this conclusion by looking at a wide range of sources, but she does not discuss any of the examples we raise here in her study. Burgess (2001, p. 219) also brings out the themes of sexual jealousy and anger in his scrutiny of a set of mythological examples in which a pregnant woman is burnt to death by her partner, although without making the connection to domestic violence.

A second line of argument that has been made previously concerning these examples is that they spring from the patriarchal ideology of ancient Greek society. Pomeroy (2007, p. 121) argues that the domestic violence depicted in the historical examples was an excessive version of the everyday domestic violence which, she believes, was typical of the treatment of women as part of a patriarchal society. Llewellyn-Jones (2011) examines how the form of patriarchal “machismo” society in which the Greeks lived is a basis for understanding levels of violence among ancient Greeks, including domestic violence (cf. Fisher, 1998, p. 77). This argument is similar to the ones made by Connell (2005) and Edwards (2006) connecting domestic violence to patriarchy and notions of masculinity. According to Llewellyn-Jones (2011, p. 241), “Women are valuable as a means of demonstrating control and authority. A man is expected to instill respect or fear within the women for whom he is responsible in order to extract the socially required compliance and correct behaviour.” A comparable point is made by Schaps (2006) in a discussion of wife-beating in the *Iliad*. He suggests that Zeus threatens to dominate and control Hera using his superior physical power if he does not feel he is winning an argument with her (cf. Synodinou, 1987). Burgess (2001, p. 225) argues, in relation to the mythological examples, that the stories articulate male concerns surrounding female control over childbirth and whether any children born are his own. Burgess claims that these myths express patriarchal ideology (p. 215). Similar arguments have also been made concerning fathers who kill their pregnant daughters in classical literature (Glotz, 1904; McHardy, 2008a; Seaforth, 1990).

We argue that, in addition to understanding these elements of power and control as emblematic of patriarchal or political dominance, they constitute typical, cross-cultural tendencies in men who are prone to intimate partner violence. We consider how far the manifestations of power and control over women in the sources are related to male feelings of sexual jealousy and to the anxiety surrounding uncertainty over paternity, which causes this jealousy. Thus, whereas Burgess (2001, p. 223) points to the significance of ancient Greek concerns about paternity in connection with Pericles’ citizenship laws and suggests the story-pattern reflects societal and cultural pressures on Greek men, our concern is with the universal anxieties encoded in the myths which we read as manifestations of the vital male struggle over women’s reproductive resources.

**Discussion**

As we surveyed above, instances of tyrants killing their wives have been explained as symbolic of the tyrants’ power and control in their own households, as well as in society.
This reading is a valuable one that focuses on the excessive and destructive acts of the men. By attacking their wives, they not only end the women’s lives, but also the lives of their own unborn children. This theme is resonant of Greek tragic plots that focus on the self-destructive tendencies of autocrats (Seaford, 1994, pp. 344–362). Herodotus’ account of Cambyses’ attack on his pregnant sister-wife emphasizes this self-destructive aspect to Cambyses, who kills his brother, sister-wife and unborn child in a series of apparently paranoid and rash attacks. He is characterized as mad (ἐξεμάνη) and his acts are called evil (τῶν κακῶν) by Herodotus because of the element of kin-killing in the story (3.31–33).

Underlying this representation is one that resonates with the descriptions of typical acts of intimate partner violence motivated by a desire to assert control. Cambyses is depicted as angry (θυμωθέντα) at the way his sister-wife challenges or disagrees with his decisions. In one of the alternative accounts narrated by Herodotus of how she came to be killed, she strips a lettuce bare and asks him whether he preferred it whole or stripped. When he replies “whole,” she asks why he stripped bare the house of his father Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. In this version her criticism of Cambyses’ decision to kill their brother, Smerdis, is overt and Cambyses is said to respond violently and immediately. His anger spills out when he perceives she is challenging him, and he launches an attack on her that causes her to miscarry and die. A similar motive is ascribed to Nero in his attack on his pregnant wife Poppaea who criticizes him for returning home late (Suetonius, Nero 35.3).

This kind of angry attack following perceived criticism is a typical characteristic of intimate partner violence where a man reacts angrily to challenges to his control and decision-making (Bacchus et al., 2006, p. 594). However, another aspect is hinted at in Herodotus’ presentation of the tale, namely the incestuous nature of Cambyses’ relationship with his sister and his fears that his brother is trying to take control of what belongs to him. In Herodotus’ alternative version of how Cambyses came to attack his sister-wife, she cries over a puppy that helps its brother in a fight with a lion-cub and explains that her tears are caused by sadness over the loss of her brother who has no one to avenge him. In this version, Herodotus suggests that Cambyses acts out of anger both at his sister-wife’s perceived criticism of the killing of Smerdis and at her feelings for their dead brother. It is possible, then, to posit that Cambyses was thought to act out of feelings of sexual jealousy emanating out of how his sister-wife weeps for their brother.

In the comparable story of Periander as narrated by Diogenes Laertius, sexual jealousy is evident as a motivating factor, although its significance has not been explored by previous commentators who have focused instead on the anecdote’s similarity to the story of Cambyses and allusion to the excesses of tyrants. Periander either throws a footstool at his pregnant wife, Melissa, or kicks her because he had heard, and was ready to believe, stories of her infidelity (1.7): “after some time, in a fit of anger, he killed his wife by throwing a footstool at her, or by a kick, when she was pregnant (ὑπ᾽ ὀργῆς βαλὼν ὑποβάθρῳ ἢ λακτίσας τὴν γυναῖκα ἐγκυον ὀυσαν ἀπέκτεινε) having been egged on by the slanderous tales of concubines, whom he afterwards burnt alive.” In this story, sexual rivals of Melissa are credited with spreading stories about her which reach the ears
of her husband. While the author makes clear that he believes those stories to have been false, it is the fact of Melissa’s pregnancy that generates the tales and Periander’s susceptibility to them.\(^2\) Periander acts out of anger and jealousy when he attacks his wife, but at the same time it is possible to understand that he is ready to attack her while she is pregnant because of doubts concerning the paternity of her child. According to this reading, this tale coheres closely to the observations made by Goetz (2008) and Polk (1994) that a controlling husband might be hypersensitive to suggestions of infidelity by his wife and very ready to believe such accusations, especially when she is pregnant.

The characterization of Chaereas in Chariton’s novel, which appears to owe something to the depiction of Periander in Diogenes Laertius, has been analyzed by scholars as reflecting the tyrannical aspects of his behavior (Hunter, 1994, p. 1080; Scourfield, 2003, p. 171), but can also be seen to reflect the anger of a jealous young man towards his beautiful young wife. The story shows explicitly how notions of sexual jealousy and possessiveness lead to anger and violence against a pregnant spouse. The plot begins when Chaereas wins the hand in marriage of Callirhoe, angering her other suitors. The rival suitors determine to plot against Chaereas by arousing his jealousy (1.2.5–6). Their first stratagem is to suggest that Callirhoe has been entertaining other men at a party in the marital house while her husband is away. When this plot does not work, they arrange for a stranger to inform Chaereas that Callirhoe is being unfaithful. Chaereas is induced to lie to his wife and spy on her as a result of his suspicions. This kind of suspicious spying matches the concept of “mate guarding” as outlined by Goetz (2008) and others. The fact that Callirhoe is depicted as both young and exceptionally beautiful also matches observations about the reactions of husbands of the most attractive wives (Goetz, 2008, p. 262). When Chaereas sees a man who is part of the plot enter the house, he believes the rumors must be true and rushes in to confront him (1.4.10). In this example, it is made clear that Chaereas is all too ready to believe suggestions of his wife’s infidelity even when passed on by a stranger. His angry reaction is impulsive, and he rushes to attack his alleged love rival. When he does not find the man in the house, he rushes in on Callirhoe and attacks her with a kick to the abdomen (1.4.12–1.5.1):

[Chaereas] could find no voice with which to reproach [Callirhoe]; but overcome by anger, he kicked at her (κρατούμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς ἐλάκτισε) as she ran forward. His foot struck the girl squarely in the diaphragm and stopped her breath. She collapsed, and her maidservants, picking her up, laid her on the bed. Thus Callirhoe lay without speech or breath, presenting to all an appearance of death. (Trans. Reardon).

Chaereas’ fears of infidelity cause him to lash out in a jealous rage kicking his pregnant wife in the abdomen. This example contains the most explicit description of a kick that targets the stomach or genital area of the woman accused of sexual infidelity. In

\(^2\) In Hdt. 3.50 Periander is also said to kill Melissa, but there is no mention of her being pregnant. Herodotus’ version does emphasise Periander’s desire to control his family members and his angry, violent behavior towards them.
recent studies, women who have experienced violence during pregnancy emphasize how their partners frequently target these areas (Bacchus et al., 2006, p. 592). It seems these parts of the anatomy hold a particular significance for a man who believes he has been cuckolded, and his attack may target the unborn child as much as the woman. Although Chaereas is not yet aware that his wife is pregnant, he is being characterized in adherence to the pattern where males connect their intimate partner’s alleged sexual infidelity with a possible pregnancy. After the event, Chaereas continues to seethe and shows no hint of regret until the truth is revealed (Scourfield, 2003, p. 164). The notion that such violence is acceptable against a woman who has been unfaithful is apparent in Chaereas’ attitude. This kind of opinion is typical of sexually proprietary men who consider themselves to be within their rights to punish or kill “their” women. Men who have just killed their partners out of jealous rage tend to show no remorse (Polk, 1994, pp. 33–34).

The story of Chaereas and Callirhoe indicates the triggers for violence even in a romantic relationship. Chaereas’ jealous reaction is anticipated by those who plot against him as a natural reaction of a young man recently married to a beautiful, young girl. Sexual jealousy is also given by the narrator as a possible mitigating factor that Chaereas could have used at his trial for homicide (1.5.4–6.1). The themes that appear in this narrative are universal ones, which match the modern case studies of intimate partner violence and uxoricide. Polk’s observation (1994, p. 32) that: “fuelled by a jealous rage, delusions can build in the minds of these men tormented by the thought of their lovers moving out of their control and into the arms of another man” fits well to this story. The episode highlights the potential for angry violence inflicted by a husband who believes he has been cuckolded. Apparent, too, are his desire to control the behavior of his wife; his sexual jealousy and possessiveness; his willingness to believe rumors about his wife’s infidelity; and his brutal assault upon her without waiting to hear her account of what had happened.

The myth of Apollo and Coronis, who is blasted to death after an act of sexual infidelity, along with those around her in one of the sources (Pind. Pyth. 3.35–37), shares some of the same themes of anger, jealousy and sexual proprietoriness that are apparent in the stories of Periander and Chaereas. In addition, the theme of male violence and possessiveness that arises where a woman attempts to leave her partner is a significant part of this story. Burton (1962, p. 83) claims that Coronis’ transgression was that she had sex with a mortal while pregnant by a god. It is our contention that Apollo is responding not only as an offended deity, but also as a cuckolded partner. There are several variants of the story, but in all of them, Coronis’ decision to move on to a relationship with Ischys while pregnant by Apollo is a constant feature. Apollo is shown expressing sexual proprietoriness towards Coronis by watching over her while he is away from home. In Pindar’s version, Apollo keeps watch on her himself, far away though he is, and observes her with another man (Pyth. 3.25–26): “For she lay in the bed of a stranger who came from Arcadia, but she did not elude the watcher.” Alternatively, while the wedding feast is being celebrated, the crow brings the news of the “secret deeds” committed in Apollo’s absence, whereby “Ischys had married Coronis…the daughter of god-born Phlegyas” (Hes. fr. 60 MW). In Hyginus’ account, Apollo sets a crow to guard his pregnant partner (Fab. 202): “When Apollo had made Coronis, daughter of Phlegyas, pregnant, he put a crow in guard, so that no one should violate her.” By instructing the crow to watch over Coronis, Apollo makes
an attempt at mate-guarding, albeit not to guard the paternity of the child, but to control the sexuality of his partner.

Apollo is depicted reacting angrily to Coronis’ betrayal, either sending his sister, Artemis, to kill her (Pind. *Pyth.* 3.31–34; cf. Paus. 2.26.6) or killing her himself (Ps. Apollod. *Bib.* 3.10.3; cf. Ov. *Met.* 2. 600–605; Hyg. *Fab.* 202). Apollo’s inability to feel proper remorse in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as discussed by Fulkerson (2006), matches the lack of remorse expressed by many of the men who killed their intimate partners in the Australian cases discussed by Polk (1994, pp. 33–34). The killing of Coronis illustrates how uxoricide can occur when the male desire to control his partner is so great that he would rather that she die than be allowed to go to another man (cf. pp. 28–29). This kind of thinking is well illustrated by the phrase “if I can’t have you, no one will...” as cited in one of Polk’s cases (p. 29). There are close connections between the killing of Coronis and a variant of the killing of Semele – or Thyone as Pindar calls her (Currie, 2005, p. 361; Lyons, 1997, pp. 93, 126; Robbins, 1990, p. 314, and n. 35). Burgess (2001) has noted the common theme of sexual jealousy leading to punishment by death in the two stories.

In the most familiar version of the myth of Semele, Semele dies after Hera tricks her into requesting that Zeus appears to her in his “pure” form – the thunderbolt – which Semele could not endure and so she was blasted to death. In the, seemingly earlier, variant, it appears that Zeus came to kill his pregnant partner because she had entered into a new relationship, with her sister Autonoe’s son, Actaeon. A papyrus summary of mythological metamorphoses summarizes the transformation of Actaeon into a stag by Artemis as recounted in the *Ehoeae*, an epic poem, surviving in fragments and attributed to the epic poet Hesiod (Hes. fr. 161a Most = *P.Mich.* inv. 1447 ii.1–6): “Actaeon, the son of Aristaeus and Autonoe, wanting marriage with Semele, ... his mother’s father .... was changed into the form of a stag by the design of Artemis, and was torn apart by his own dogs.” (Trans. Renner). The transformation occurs, then, not because Actaeon saw the goddess bathing (e.g., Callimachus 5.107–118; Apollod. *Bib.* 3.4.4), or because he boasted that he was a superior hunter to Artemis (e.g., Eur. *Bacch.* 337–340), but because Artemis is being used to get rid of a rival of Zeus (P. Oxy. 2509, on which see Janko, 1984). According to Acusilaus of Argos, Zeus had Actaeon killed for pursuing Semele (2F33 at Apollod. *Bib.* 3.4.4). This appears to have been the key, and perhaps the only, explanation for the death of Actaeon until Euripides’ *Bacchae* (Renner, 1978, p. 283; Schlam, 1984, pp. 86–87). The accusation by Semele’s sisters that she died because of an illicit sexual act (Eur. *Bacch.* 26–31; cf. Apollod. *Bib.* 3.4.3), might be denoting the alternative explanation for her death at Zeus’ hands. A fragment of Aeschylus’ *Semele* identifies Actaeon as a competitor who was killed by Zeus (fr. 359 Mette). According to Stesichorus, Artemis disguised Actaeon as a stag to get his dogs to eat him “in order that he would not take Semele as wife” (fr. 236 Page, at Paus. 9.2.3). In a fragment of Aeschylus’ *Toxotides*, Actaeon says, indicating perhaps Semele (fr. 243 Radt): “the blazing gaze of a young girl does not escape me, if she has tasted of a man: for such I have an experienced eye.” (Trans. Gantz). The possibility that Zeus killed Semele for this reason could explain why, on a hydria from the late fifth or early fourth century BCE by the Semele Painter, the thunderbolt is depicted above the dead Semele (Berkeley 8.3316; Arafat, 1990, pp. 44–47). It would also explain a series of vase-paintings where Zeus is making ready to hurl the
Uxoricide in pregnancy

thunderbolt at a fleeing woman who might be Semele. For example, one side of a red-
figured Nolan neck-amphora of c. 480–470 by the Berlin Painter shows Zeus wielding the
thunderbolt (London BM E313). On the other side of the vase, a woman, perhaps Semele
(Gantz, 1993, p. 477), is looking back at Zeus with her left hand raised, presumably in
supplication.

In the case of Semele, as in the case of Coronis, the unborn infant is rescued by its
divine father from the ensuing blaze in which the mortal woman dies. A mortal
mythological male, Amphitryon, threatens to engulf his wife in a comparable blaze,
prompted by feelings of sexual jealousy and possessiveness. In this case, though, unlike the
examples of Coronis and Semele, questions of paternity are central to his angry response.
Amphitryon returns home from exile having avenged the murder of his wife’s brothers and
having thus met the conditions that she imposed on him before she would allow him
conjugal rights (e.g., Ps. Apollod. 2.4.6–8; Diod. Sic. 4.9; Hyg. Fab. 29). Before his return,
however, Zeus had slept with Alcmene disguised as Amphitryon. In a sense Alcmene has,
in fact, been deflowered by Zeus because when Zeus takes on a particular form, to a degree
that form is the god, as is suggested above all by the example of Leda, who lays an egg
after encountering Zeus the form of a swan (e.g., Paus. 3.16.1). As the product of the union
of Zeus-as-Amphitryon and Alcmene, Heracles, is the child of Zeus, but also the child of
Amphitryon. On discovering that his wife has been impregnated in his own form but not
through his own act, Amphitryon tries to kill her. When she takes refuge at an altar, he tries
to turn the altar into her funeral pyre by setting light to it, aided by Antenor. A Paestan red-
figured bell-krater (London BM F149) by Python II of c. 360–320 BCE, which may have
been inspired by a play by Euripides (Gantz, 1993, p. 377; Webster, 1967, pp. 92–94),
shows Amphitryon and Antenor, both named, setting fire to the altar. Alcmene’s raised
hand either indicates her attempt at supplication, or signals her appeal to Zeus, who looks
down from above. The attempted uxoricide fails because Zeus intervenes, both directly, by
hurling down thunderbolts (shown under the pyre), and by getting the Hyades to pour rain
on the pyre, and so ensuring the survival of Alcmene. Amphitryon’s attempted uxoricide is
depicted similarly on several other South Italian vase paintings where Zeus and his agents
are frustrating the attempts by Amphitryon and Antenor to light a fire around the altar at
which Alcmene has taken refuge (LIMC, s.v. “Alkmene,” nos. 3–7; see Burgess, 2001, p.
219). As we have seen, where Zeus himself is the cuckolded partner, rather than – as here –
the adulterer, he performs the act attempted by Amphitryon, of burning his unfaithful
partner to death.

This example makes clear the connection discussed earlier between the concern
about unfaithful partners becoming pregnant by other men and angry, violent responses
which threaten to kill both woman and child. The choice of burning, which appears in these
stories, symbolizes destructive vengeance of a man against his partner (cf. Gantz, 1977).
The theme has a possible parallel in the cases discussed by Polk where men threaten to
burn their partners alive by setting the house on fire (Polk, 1994). The concept of
destroying the household root and branch is evoked by this image of the threat to burn
down the house with all the family in it (cf. Connor, 1985).

Zeus does not kill Metis as such but he comes as close as a god might to a fellow
deity’s murder when he swallows her, and terminates her independent existence (Hes. Th.):
Zeus, king of the gods, made Metis his wife first, she who knows most things among gods and mortal men, but when she was about to bear the goddess gleaming-eyed Athena, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her down in his own belly, as Gaia and starry Ouranos advised. They advised him thus so that no other should hold royal honor over the eternal gods in place of Zeus, for it was decreed that resourceful children would be born of her, first the daughter, gleaming-eyed Tritogeneia, equal to her father in fierceness and shrewdness, but afterwards she was to bear a son, the king of gods and men who possessed an overbearing heart. But Zeus beforehand put her down into his own belly, so that the goddess might warn him about both good and evil. (pp. 886-900; Trans. Deacy)

Previous scholars have read this swallowing of Metis in a variety of ways, including as emblematic of the patriarchal oppression of women (e.g., Doherty, 1995, pp. 1–8); as a story about how Zeus consolidates his power by transforming himself from one divine player among many in a volatile system into the ruler who has all the aces (Detienne and Vernant, 1978, pp. 107–130); or as a story about how Zeus deals with the threat to his rule of the children of the marriage by swallowing Metis to prevent her from giving birth to a son and successor (Yasumura, 2011, p. 86; cf. Felson, 2011). To these readings we add a further dimension by exploring how Zeus’ attack on Metis matches, on a fantastic level, the uxoricidal violence that men perform when their control is threatened. The story typifies the mythological interplay between gods as susceptible to human emotions, and as fantasy figures who surpass human limitations (Vernant, 1991). Zeus’ quest to control his family members, which elsewhere includes threatened or actual violence (See, e.g., Il. 1.560–589; 15.12–23; Llewellyn-Jones, 2011, pp. 242–244; Schaps, 2006; Synodinou, 1987), is taken to a further degree here. When his control is threatened by his first wife and her unborn offspring, he takes violent measures to establish the control suited to his position as head of the family (and in his case head of the entire kosmos).

Adopting such a perspective on Zeus’s swallowing of Metis might explain why, in an alternative theogonic account, possibly contemporary with Hesiod’s (Yasumura, 2011, p. 86), after Zeus has had sex with Metis, he immediately seizes her and forces her inside his body (Hes. fr. 343.7, 9–10 MW), either in an attempt to ensure that she will not conceive his child, or in order to determine that the child ultimately born will appear to be his monogenic offspring. In either scenario, his act is an extreme instance of what perpetrators of partner-abuse seek, namely control over the reproductive resources of their partner.

In an alternative account of the circumstances surrounding the swallowing of Metis, Zeus takes a uxoricidal measure to assume, or at least share, the paternity of Athena. In this version, Metis was not pregnant by Zeus, but by the Cyclops Brontes (“Thunder”):

Zeus swallowed down Metis, the daughter of Oкеanos, who changed her shape to many things, because he wanted to have her inside himself when she was pregnant by Brontes the Cyclops. And when the child was brought to perfection, Zeus gave birth out of his head and gave her to the river Triton to rear her. Thus she is called Tritogeneia, because she has been enhanced by these three: Brontes, Zeus and Triton (Schol. bT ad Hom Il. 8.39. Trans. Deacy).
It is not clear in the short description by the Homeric scholiast, whether or not Zeus was already married to Metis. If we are to understand the pair as husband and wife, the action against Metis represents a violent reaction by Zeus against sexual infidelity which is comparable to the examples discussed previously. Alternatively, Zeus is seeking to turn the offspring of the union of two dangerous powers of violence and cunning into his self-born child by burying the pregnant mother inside his own body and subsequently bearing the child out of this body. However, this attempt to control the reproductive resources of Metis by supplanting them fails insofar as he fails to become the sole paternal figure who contributes to the formation of Athena, instead sharing this role with both Brontes, and a third figure, Triton, who is both the personification of the river beside which the goddess is born, and the individual who rears her. Athena, who is elsewhere described in ancient sources as deriving her identity from her status as the self-born daughter of Zeus (Deacy, 2008, pp. 17–32), is here the product of three father-figures. For all that Zeus is immortal, in his role as quintessential patriarch and the model of the tyrant, he displays the same concern over control in his relationships that men exhibit in classical myth and in modern case studies.

Conclusions

Previous classical research has sought to explain uxoricide in pregnancy in relation to culturally-specific concepts of tyrannical abuse and patriarchy. We have shown that, to supplement this work, the evidence needs to be interpreted as one particular culture’s response to a transcultural behavioral phenomenon. We have demonstrated how comparable impulses to those exhibited in modern examples can be detected in the ancient sources, including desire for control, sexual proprietorship, mate guarding, uncertainty over paternity, and paternity guarding. We have shown how the ancient evidence exemplifies universal male anxiety over the control of reproductive resources, and matches the uxoricide anger that can be experienced by men from modern case studies whose control is threatened. The impulses that drive men in the ancient Greek sources are, therefore, analogous with evolutionary impulses that produce violent behavior both cross-culturally and transhistorically. Our study shows the potential for evolutionary psychology to open new possibilities for research into ancient Greek spousal relationships and male fears concerning their partner’s reproductive resources. It also shows how classicists can participate in the development of evolutionary theory through the accumulation of evidence and the consideration of strategies for its interpretation.

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Uxoricide in pregnancy

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