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# "NOT WORTH THE REARING": THE CAUSES OF INFANT EXPOSURE IN ANCIENT GREECE

CYNTHIA PATTERSON
*Emory University*

The historian of ancient Greece, especially the economic and social historian, stands in a special and perhaps inherently ambiguous relationship to his evidence; what should be his attitude towards the mosaic of scattered, anecdotal, and inferential evidence that confronts him when he undertakes to discuss such topics as the social and economic importance of slavery, the nature and causes of population growth, or the practice of infanticide—in Greek terms, the exposing or setting out of the newly born child?[1] Should he embrace the evidence such as it is and try to create a composite picture or argument, or selectively accept and reject evidence on pre-established grounds of plausibility or usefulness, *or* reject ancient testimony entirely and argue on the basis of hypothetical models or historical parallels? The evidence is not systematic or complete; can a complete and systematic picture be put together from it?

The problem is not simply a supposed lack of evidence. An equally serious if less appreciated problem is how to treat and what to expect of the evidence that does exist. What questions can and should be asked of the evidence? The issue of infanticide or exposure is a singularly good illustration of this historiographical problem as well as an important social phenomenon. Although the recent spate of literature on the topic[2]

[1] By referring to the topic as "infanticide" I am *not* implying that exposure is equivalent in all cases to infanticide. Clearly in infanticide the death of the infant is the necessary result; in exposure it is only an expected or possible result, an ambiguity which serves well the plots of New Comedy. However, given that "exposure" does seem to have been the prevailing way of disposing of unwanted infants and to have been viewed as an act of violence against the newborn comparable to the abortion of the fetus (see, e.g., *LSCG* 119; *LSAM* 84; cf. Sophocles *O.C.* 272), I think it is fair to continue the practice of referring to the issue as one of infanticide. Hereafter, however, I shall refer to "exposure/infanticide." See the text pp. 104–7 for further comments on the implications of Greek terminology.

[2] Donald Engels, "The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Greco-Roman World," *CP* 75 (1980) 112–20; "The Use of Historical Demography in Ancient History," *CQ* 34 (1984) 386–93; Mark Golden, "The Exposure of Girls at Athens," *Phoenix* 35 (1981) 316–31; William Harris, "The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the Greco-Roman World," *CQ* 32 (1982) 114–16; Sarah Pomeroy, "Infanticide in Hellenistic

has pressed for quantifiable results—how many infants were exposed?—this seems to me neither what we should expect the evidence to provide nor what we should want to learn from it. Not all social phenomena lend themselves equally to quantification. While it is useful and reasonable to ask about what may have been the birth and death rates in classical antiquity and to try to answer using theoretical models or comparative evidence, it is not so useful or reasonable to concentrate attention upon finding a simple rate for exposure/infanticide, a practice with complex social, economic, and psychological variables. Further, contemporary anthropological discussion of infanticide, appealed to in several recent articles, can provide interesting comparative material but cannot establish the frequency of or reasons for the practice in Greece. On the other hand, while the ancient sources do not support quantitative conclusions, they do tell us much about the practice of exposure/infanticide in antiquity and compel a conclusion emphasizing its unqualified if unquantifiable importance in Greek society.

My purpose here is to consider the general historiographic as well as specific historical issues involved in the topic of Greek exposure/infanticide by offering first a critical discussion of the present state of the debate and second some positive contribution to a series of themes and issues which emerges from what the ancient authors have to say on the subject.[3] As a necessary preface to both parts of the paper, however, something should be said of the Greek terminology relating to the exposing of the newborn child.

Exposure, it should be emphasized, does not equal "child-murder" in either language or practice. Greek writers used forms of *ektithêmi* ("expose, set out") and related words (*apotithêmi*, *ekballô*) for the dis-

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Greece," *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London 1983) 207–22.

For the earlier debate see: G. Glotz, "Expositio," Daremberg-Saglio 2 (1892) 930–39; L. van Hook, "The Exposure of Infants at Athens," *TAPA* 51 (1920) 134–45; H. Bolkestein, "The Exposure of Infants at Athens and the Egchutristriai," *CP* 17 (1922) 222–39; A. Cameron, "The Exposure of Children and Greek Ethics," *CR* 46 (1932) 105–14. Cf. also the comments of A. Zimmern, *The Greek Commonwealth* (Oxford 1922[3]) 330f.; A. W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens* (Oxford 1933) note C; and W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization* (London 1952[3]) 100–102.

[3] Although it has been claimed that infanticide increased dramatically in the Hellenistic period or was really only prevalent at this time (see, for example, van Hook, above, note 2), I shall not argue that position here. Rather I suggest that since the *oikos* was the basic unit of Greek society through the archaic, classical, and Hellenistic periods and exposure a means employed by the *oikos* to dispose of unwanted infants, exposure can be discussed as a general phenomenon of Greek society not bound to any one period of Greek history. It will have been practiced to a greater or lesser extent in particular years or by particular classes within any of those periods. The view that exposure only became prevalent in the Hellenistic period goes hand in hand with a view of the essential decadence of Hellenistic Greeks.

posal of the newborn and distinguished this from *paidoktoneô* ("kill a child") and the like.[4] The essential difference between *ektithêmi* and *paidoktoneô* lies not so much in the nature of the action taken as in the status or position of the victim. Killing or causing the death of a newborn child (very often called a *brephos*, a term also used to refer to the fetus in the womb) in the first days of life was something quite different—legally, morally, and terminologically it seems—from killing a child who was a recognized and named member of a family. When a form of *paidoktoneô* is used to refer to the killing or "exposing" of a newborn, it is with clear polemical and dramatic intent.[5] (A similar dramatic effect is produced by Herodotus' description of the newborn Cypselus smiling at his would-be murderers [5.92] or Euripides' picture of the day-old Ion reaching out his arms to his mother [*Ion* 961]—two quite precocious newborns!) To those familiar with the Greek evidence, this point on the meaning of "exposure" might seem obvious and not worth stressing, but it is important to realize that in ancient Greek language and society "exposure" was a limited and specific act affecting not a recognized member of the household or *oikos* but rather a newborn *brephos* who had as yet no place within the family unit.[6] In the well-known metaphorical reference to infanticide (or exposure) in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates very clearly presents the decision to expose a newborn as taking place in connection with the ceremony of the *amphidromia* (the "walking around" the hearth), at which the newborn child was named and accepted into the family:

> Here at last, then, after our somewhat painful labor, is the child we have brought to birth, whatever sort of creature it may be. His birth should be followed by the ceremony of carrying him round the hearth; we must look at our offspring from every angle to make sure we are not taken in by a lifeless phantom not worth the rearing. Or do you think an infant of yours must be reared in any case and not exposed? Will you bear to see him put to the proof, and not be in a passion if your first born should be taken away? (160C–161E, transl. Cornford)

The ceremony was also known in Athens as the *dekatê*,[7] indicating its celebration on the tenth day of the infant's life. Although Socrates

[4] See the "Endnote" of Golden's article (above, note 2) for a good brief discussion of terminology and its implications.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Douglas MacDowell misses this essential point when he comments that while an Athenian father "did not have the right to put his child to death, simply leaving a living child did not count as homicide" (*The Law in Classical Athens* [Ithaca 1978] 91). The critical distinction is not that between killing and letting die but between *pais* and *brephos*. MacDowell also regards Athenian New Comedy with its frequent reference to infant exposure as sufficient proof that "parents were under no legal obligation to rear a child" (ibid.).

[7] Isaeus 3.30; Demosthenes 39.22. See also MacDowell (above, note 6) 91.

speaks as though the child is inspected for defects at this time, I would suppose that this was merely a formal inspection and that the child had been examined in private soon after birth. The first days of an infant's life were recognized as critical to its survival; Aristotle (*HA* 8.588A8) emphasized the high mortality in the first week of life. By the tenth day, it would be clearer who was or was not likely to survive.

Thus, "*child-murder*" can be legally prohibited[8] and morally abhorrent[9] but "exposure" a commonly recognized act—as Plato's metaphor suggests—unaffected by laws on homicide.[10]

It does not seem that "expose" was a euphemism for stronger language. Exposure *was* apparently the most common method of disposing of unwanted infants. The term "expose" was not, however, necessarily neutral in moral import,[11] nor exposure completely free from religious pollution or personal feelings of responsibility. In a fragmentary Hellenistic inscription from Ptolemais dealing with purification requirements, abortion and exposure (both ways of destroying the *brephos*) apparently follow in succession and perhaps require the same purification period.[12] For an act to require purification does not necessarily imply moral or legal reprehensibility: sexual intercourse and childbirth also require purification. The relatively long period of purification for both acts, however, suggests that abortion and exposure were more serious sources of pollution in the eyes of the framers of sacred law and perhaps society in general.[13] On a personal level, Sophocles' Oedipus, when asserting his own innocence of conscious wrong-doing, imputes moral reprehensibility to his parents' *knowing* act of exposure (literally of his destruction; *O.C.* 272).

Without risking oversimplification of a difficult issue it can at least be said that Greek terminology suggests a view of exposure of the newborn as essentially distinct and different from the killing or harming of a child who is a recognized member of a family. The beginning of a

[8] In Athens, it was from the time of Solon unlawful for a man to sell his children into slavery; *a fortiori*, it could be argued, he could not kill them. See A. R. W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens* (Oxford 1968) 1.70–74.

[9] From Euripides we have two striking examples, Heracles' murder of his children (*Heracles* 921–1015) and Medea's of hers (*Medea* 1236ff.). In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* Agamemnon's sacrificing of his daughter is an integral element in the tragedy of the house of Atreus (*Agamemnon* 217–57).

[10] Cf. Harrison (above, note 8) 1.70–71 and footnote 2.

[11] "Euphemism" and "neutral" are terms suggested by Golden (above, note 2, 331) as possible ways of understanding the Greek terminology of "exposure." It should be noted that "strangle" is used for this purpose in one Delphic inscription (*GDI* 2171), suggesting a literal meaning also for *expose*.

[12] *LSCG* 119; cf. *LSAM* 84.

[13] These points were made by Susan Cole in "Gunaixi ou Themis," a paper delivered at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Vassar College, 1981.

meaningful and recognized life is put—in terms of the language used—at the point of initiation into the family unit. This is not to say that exposure and any resulting infanticide is an unproblematic or non-traumatic act (Plato in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle in the *Politics*, and Euripides in the *Ion* attest to both strong personal and societal objections in some cases) but rather that there was a firm line in language, social practice, and implicitly in law between the position of the newborn (and the fetus) of either sex and the named and legitimate child.

## I. Recent Discussion of Infanticide

Set against the subtleties implicit in Greek usage, the recent narrowing of the issue to "how many female infants can Greek populations have exposed?" appears simplistic and blind-sighted. The spark of the 1980s' debate was Donald Engels's suggestion (above, note 2) that female infanticide was of "negligible" importance in antiquity because killing 20% of female infants *would have*—calculating from a suitable model life table and given certain assumptions about fertility—cut the population in half in some 58 years.[14] The simplistic character of Engels's argument (which it should be said obscured much that was valuable in his article) was quickly pointed out. Mark Golden and William Harris made essentially the same point, that infanticide might be implicit in the equilibrium between birth and death rates proposed by Engels. That is, if the birth rate was 40/1,000/year and the non-infanticidal death rate was 36/1,000/year, infanticide at a rate of 4/1,000/year would result in Engels's near-zero population growth. But Engels assumes equilibrium *before* adding in the effect of infanticide.[15] A minor objection, but also important in revealing the over-simplicity of the analysis, is that Engels's argument suggests that infanticide affected all female infants equally. In fact, the illegitimate or physically weak or defective would have been more likely to suffer exposure but also less likely to marry and reproduce to the same extent as the healthy, legitimate females. Thus female infanticide would not necessarily have affected the population to the extent Engels's calculations suggest.[16]

Perhaps the most untenable assumption in Engels's paper, and one not addressed by Golden or Harris, is that exposure resulting in infanticide must occur at a rate of ten or twenty percent in order to be signifi-

[14] Engels, "The Problem of Female Infanticide" (above, note 2) 112, 118–19. He repeats his claim in his 1984 article (above, note 2); see especially 386, note 1. Engels uses A. Coale and P. Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations* (Princeton 1966) for a population with a life expectancy of about 25 years and assumes an average fertility of 40/1,000/year ("The Problem of Female Infanticide," 118).

[15] Harris (above, note 2) 115; Golden (above, note 2) 319, note 10.

[16] This point was suggested to me by Duncan Foley.

cant. An event—especially one as potentially emotionally charged as infanticide—can occur only once in a hundred cases or less and still be significant or even considered common. There is a "psychic cost"[17] involved which cannot be measured by simple rates or percentages. As Alvin Gouldner has observed in relation to Greek slavery, the impact of that institution depends not only on *how many* people are enslaved per year, but also on how often slavery is a *potential* fate.[18] Similarly, infant exposure will have had a far broader impact on Greek society than is reflected in calculations or arguments about *numbers* of infants actually exposed or killed.

Engels's critics, however, while rejecting the legitimacy of his conclusions, have accepted his definition of the problem. "At what rate were female infants exposed?" Mark Golden offered an alternative argument for a rate of female exposure (= infanticide on his argument) in Athens of ten percent or higher (above, note 2). Essentially, the argument is that given the tendency of Athenian women to marry early (in their teens) and men to marry later (at about 30), Athens *would have* suffered from a "marriage squeeze" (too many eligible women) *unless* a significant number of female infants was killed. When Golden looks for evidence for such a squeeze he finds only *Lysistrata* 591–97 on the plight of unmarried women. This he regards as prompted by the special circumstances of the later Peloponnesian War (p. 330, note 49). Thus, the lack of a "marriage squeeze" in "normal" times is evidence *for* female infanticide.

Golden then suggests further that a *potential* marriage squeeze was a possible cause, not simply an indication, of infanticide:[19]

> Now consider briefly the position of the father of a newborn girl at Athens. He was used to making decisions for and about women and children, and was in general encouraged to do so. He was no demographer, but he would be aware of the costs of raising a daughter and of the risk that she might not marry.... Isn't it reasonable to suppose that under these circumstances the exposure of girls was widespread?

Thus, the Athenian father exposes his daughter to *prevent* an imagined marriage squeeze which would deny her a husband. But why should we suppose that he took such a risk so seriously if a marriage squeeze was not in fact a problem? Is this not assuming an unlikely demographic *awareness* and responsibility on the part of Athenian fathers?

[17] The term is used by Alvin Gouldner, *The Hellenic World* (New York 1965) 25.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Golden (above, note 2) 326. Golden also uses the Coale-Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables* (above, note 14) as the basis for his calculations of proportions of males and females surviving to various ages.

If, Golden argues in anticipation of an objection to his hypothesis, female Athenians had a somewhat lower life expectancy than males, owing to such things as the dangers of childbirth, and if therefore approximately the same number of women reached marriageable age as men, *still* without female infanticide (to further depress the female population, it seems) there would still have been a marriage squeeze owing to an overabundance of *widows* (women outliving their husbands) wanting to remarry. Thus, Golden concludes, "the *easiest* way (my italics) to avoid this problem was to expose girls at birth. And 10 percent, or more, does not seem unlikely."[20]

Although the possible relationship between the sex ratio and marriage practice in Athens is interesting and important, there are major problems with Golden's thesis which assumes female infanticide as the only way of preventing a non-existing marriage squeeze. First, Golden does not realize that to claim that the lack of an apparent squeeze indicates an unequal sex ratio owing to female infanticide is significantly different from claiming that the Athenian father's concern about the *potentiality* of a marriage squeeze caused him to expose so many of his daughters. Second, and perhaps more important, he does not distinguish clearly between societal and familial interest in regulating the female population. Who is going to determine which ten percent—or *that* ten percent—cannot be reared? (What father would admit that *his* daughter would not find a husband?) Moreover, it seems intuitively wrong to assume that traditional marriage patterns could *cause* the acceptance of female infanticide. Rather, both marriage and child-rearing practices would seem to be part of the larger, complex system of values, customs, economic needs, and social norms by which Athenian society maintained its traditional order and equilibrium. A simple case of cause and effect as suggested by Golden seems very unlikely. And if there *was* in fact a problem with a potential marriage squeeze, not everyone would agree that the "easiest way" to solve the problem was by female infanticide. Further, as Golden recognizes, female infanticide is clearly not the only way in which a skewed sex ratio can be caused. If in fact a skewed ratio existed in Athens preventing a marriage squeeze, one could argue that it was primarily the result of high female mortality in early childhood owing to neglect or preferential treatment given to male children, or in early adulthood owing to the dangers of early marriage and pregnancy. (This point will be taken up again.) Golden's attempt to account for, and then discount, this factor by assuming a life expectancy of 20 years for Athenian females (as opposed to 25 for males) seems extremely inadequate and arbitrary. And finally, Golden's argument is in its essentials quite removed from social and historical evidence. Just as

[20] Ibid. 330.

there is no apparent marriage squeeze (apart from the important testimony of *Lysistrata* 591–97), there is likewise no evidence that the possibility of such a squeeze, caused by an abundance either of virgins or of widows, was viewed as a problem to be solved by female infanticide.[21]

In addition to his theoretical demographic arguments, Golden also tries to buttress his case by appeal to the reports and generalized claims of anthropologists on this topic. He and Harris both quote the following sentence from a recent survey: "At rates of 5 to 50 percent of all live-births, it [infanticide] occurs in hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, and stratified agrarian societies."[22] The inadequacy of such claims for establishing the prevalence of the practice in ancient Greece need hardly be emphasized.

Sarah Pomeroy (above, note 2) has offered a different sort of evidence from a different time and place, which she argues supports the probability of an unspecified high rate of female infanticide in Hellenistic Greece.[23] Her evidence consists of a series of Milesian inscriptions from primarily the 3rd century B.C. recording the granting of citizenship to mercenaries (largely Cretan) and their families.[24] In these inscriptions sons outnumber daughters 4 to 1 (118 to 28). The ratio is remarkable and has been noticed before. Clearly, if infanticide is a factor here, it is not the only factor. Pomeroy carefully discusses possible factors influencing or skewing the numbers (for example women are often not counted; female children will probably have married earlier than male children), but considers them inadequate to explain the full difference. There is no quantitative weighing of factors here, but simply a judgment (seemingly present from the outset making the argument somewhat *pro forma*) that such a discrepancy *must* indicate a "high rate" of female infanticide.

[21] Note that despite his use of "exposure" rather than "infanticide," Golden's *argument* assumes that all exposed infants died.

[22] Golden (above, note 2) 318; Harris (above, note 2) 116. This quotation comes from M. Dickeman, "Demographic Consequences of Infanticide in Man," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 6 (1975) 130. Dickeman's more recent views can be found in her introduction to the section on human infanticide in *Infanticide, Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives*, ed. G. Hausfater and S. B. Hrdy (New York 1984) 427–37. Of special interest here are her cautions against searching for numbers rather than reasons and against the undiscriminating use of cross-cultural studies (433).

[23] Pomeroy states "A general rate of female infanticide for Hellenistic Greece has not been established, but even a rate as high as the one suggested by the Delphinian inscriptions need not have been suicidal for the people concerned" (217). It is unclear, however, just *what* rate she thinks the inscriptions suggest. Further, her view that a population would easily and non-problematically solve its resulting shortage of numbers by "mass enfranchisements" (ibid.) is seriously at odds with the basic nature of Greek society and the polis.

[24] *Milet* I.3, 34–37. These inscriptions were also discussed and taken to suggest the prevalence of infanticide by Tarn (above, note 2) 100–102.

Pomeroy comments sensibly on the probable reluctance or inability of a mercenary to travel with daughters and on other realities of mercenary life.[25] Her conclusion, however, that these mercenaries were a typical Hellenistic population and her implied conclusion that the inscriptions provide an indication of the rate at which infanticide might have been practiced in the Hellenistic world at large are both unfounded. While it is perhaps fair to say that "the Hellenistic period may be characterized as the age of the deracinated Greek and of the mercenary soldier,"[26] it is not true that such a group of mercenary soldiers and families are an adequate statistical sample for the population as a whole. A mercenary is not a typical Greek in any period of Greek history; in many respects the mercenary is always atypical, outside the traditional bounds and norms of family and city. Further, while the Milesian mercenaries may well have exposed a significant number of their daughters (or instructed their wives to do so), we cannot prove that with these inscriptions. The inscriptions belong in the category of prosopographical evidence; they are not systematic records of mortality. Pomeroy is aware of the many problems inherent in interpreting prosopographical evidence, but still wants to insist that these records prove the practice of infanticide. The historical probability that mercenaries exposed daughters depends not on such inscriptions but on what we know or can surmise (as Pomeroy surmises) about their lifestyle, economic position, and the like. In her paper Pomeroy envisions a series of hypothetical situations in which mercenaries would expose their daughters (e.g., "an impoverished widow was not an attractive bride, certainly not in the Hellenistic period, when many men chose not to marry at all. The spectre of these unmarried women must have discouraged soldiers from raising daughters").[27] But she does not see the essential irrelevance or indifference of her inscriptional "statistics" to the probability of her hypotheses about mercenaries, and to any quantitative conclusions about the frequency of infanticide in ancient Greece.

## II. Return to the Ancient Evidence

Although demographic arguments and models can be helpful in the interpretation of Greek history—and presumably will be increasingly helpful as more sophisticated models and applications are found—there is no need to regard demography and quantitative study as the only hope for understanding the phenomenon of exposure/infanticide in ancient Greece. There *is* ancient evidence which suggests not only that infanticide was practiced, but also that it was significant and pervasive in its impact on Greek society. There are specific references in inscribed

[25] Pomeroy (above, note 2) 215–16.
[26] Ibid. 218.
[27] Ibid. 217.

laws or contracts, specific recommendations by Aristotle and Plato for exposing or not rearing infants in certain situations, along with the more general evidence of the mythical and dramatic theme of the abandoned child or the complaints of moralists about Greeks refusing to rear children.[28] But the most incontrovertible and suggestive evidence is the metaphorical use of "exposure" in reference to the abandonment or rejection of other sorts of offspring or progeny such as Plato's "exposure" of defective arguments (referred to earlier) in the *Theaetetus* (160C–161E) or Aristophanes' abandoning of a youthful play written when his maiden muse was not a proper parent (*Clouds* 530–32). When a word or practice can be used metaphorically in this way we can be sure it is something generally familiar in its original sense.

The *Theaetetus* and *Clouds* references are important in another way: the first refers to the physically defective, the second to the illegitimate offspring; neither refers to the exposing of a healthy legitimate child. Modern discussion, however, has not usually made this distinction. "Infanticide" has been treated as a simple phenomenon (with primary emphasis on the exposing of the healthy, legitimate, especially female, infant) to be explained by accordingly single-threaded, simple arguments. On this score, there is no significant difference between early twentieth century apologetics such as Zimmern's[29]

> The Greeks found themselves face to face with a great, practical difficulty, the natural increase of mankind. It was more than a difficulty; it was a terror looming larger every year,

and recent statements to the effect that infanticide was "necessary in peacetime" or an unavoidable result of poverty.[30]

The aim of the second part of this paper will be to unravel the many-stranded phenomenon of exposure, and, as it unravels, to present in a positive way the range and depth of our sources relating to this

[28] *The Law Code of Gortyn* (ed. Willets, Berlin 1967) III, 45–48 (on the power of divorced woman over newborn child); *GDI* (reference to a freed slave's right to rear or *strangle* but not to sell her child); Aristotle *Politics* 7.16; Plato, *Republic* 460C (a notoriously difficult reference to the "hiding away" of children born defective or of inferior parents). On the recurrent motif of exposure in myth (e.g., Oedipus or Atalanta) and drama (Euripides' *Ion* or Menander's *Perikeiromene*), see D. B. Redford, "The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child," *Numen* 14 (1967) 209–28 and Gilbert Murray, "A Ritual Element in the New Comedy," *CQ* 37 (1943) 46ff. On the philosophical and moral objections to exposure see Cameron (above, note 2). For a useful compilation of relevant sources see Louis R. F. Germaine, "Aspects de droit d'exposition en Grèce," *Rev. hist. de droit gr. et étr.* 47 (1969) 177–97.

[29] *The Greek Commonwealth* (above, note 2) 326.

[30] Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York 1975) 69: "Infanticide was necessary to limit the population in peace time." In "Infanticide in Hellenistic Greece" (above, note 2, 217) she suggests that infanticide was "forced" on families because of poverty.

issue. My method will be to consider separately situations in which infanticide/exposure was or is said to have been practiced, where the child was physically defective or weak, illegitimate, born into an impoverished household, or female. If the sources do not present a totally coherent or unambiguous picture, it may well be that in this case they accurately reflect Greek attitudes on what remains today a difficult human problem.

A. The Physically Defective Child

The exposure of the physically defective infant is usually—and correctly I think—considered a routine practice in ancient Greece. In Sparta there was an official public inspection (Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 16), but the Spartans were not unique in their attitude. Aristotle prefaces his comments on infanticide and possible objections to the practice with the absolute requirement that no deformed (*pepêromenon*) child shall be reared (*Politics* 7.16). And, as already emphasized, Plato, in a different way but just as clearly, attests to contemporary attitudes when he uses the metaphor of exposing defective intellectual progeny born by the discussion in the *Theaetetus* (160C–161A).

However, if the exposure of a defective child is regular or routine, it is not thereby unproblematic or without relevance to understanding the phenomenon of exposure as a whole. Modern experience (even if admittedly on a very different medical level) with the extreme difficulty in making some critical judgments on the fate of newborns with serious problems, in reconciling or balancing the interests of family, society, and, most recently, the child, should lead us to look more closely at how such decisions were made in antiquity and what sorts of criteria were used. "Defective" or "nonviable" may not always be easily applied terms. Although there is, not surprisingly, little specific information on this, we can make a beginning by considering the language used and what it implies.

In the *Republic*, Plato speaks of *to anapêron* (something maimed or mutilated) which should be, he says, hidden away in some secret place (*Republic* 460C).[31] As noted, Aristotle uses a related verbal form (perfect passive participle of *pêroô*, *Politics* 7.16). The primary implication is of physical deformity or lameness of the limbs such as would be immediately recognizable at birth. Even more general is Plutarch's description of the criteria for Spartan infants: they must be *enpagês* (solid, well put together) and *rômaleon* (strong, sturdy), not *agenês* (base, ill-born) or *amorphos* (ill-shapen). The overall implication is that the infant must be both vigorous and without deformity. In the *Theaetetus* Plato simply

[31] As noted earlier (above, note 28), this is a difficult text to interpret. Infanticide or exposure seems to be the intent, but why the cryptic language? See the commentary of James Adam, *Plato's Republic* (Cambridge 1969²).

speaks of offspring "not worth rearing"—even if it is a firstborn whose parent is in a "passion" to keep it.

Some unusually specific requirements for a child "worth rearing" are provided by the 2nd century C.E. physician, Soranus of Ephesus. In his gynecological treatise he instructs the midwife to consider the following criteria:[32]

1) the mother should be healthy
2) the baby should be full-term
3) it should cry with vigor
4) it should be "perfect" (*teleion*) in all its parts
5) its "ducts" must be free of obstruction
6) the natural functions of every member should be neither sluggish nor weak
7) the joints must bend and stretch
8) it should have the right size and shape and be properly sensitive to stimulus.

A crucial difference between the two very different sorts of criteria (the general "lay" requirements and the specific medical ones) is of course just who is applying them. We might wonder how often a newborn received such a thorough examination as Soranus describes and how often a midwife or any medical person was consulted. (Perhaps these criteria were applied after a neonatal death to determine if it had in fact been "worth rearing" or not.) Some might simply assert that "very rarely" was any such complete examination made and that in most cases the male head of the household simply looked at the child and determined whether or not it was "viable" on the general basis suggested by Plutarch and Aristotle. Remember, however, that it is Socrates practicing his maternal art of midwifery who examines the "newborn" ideas. Childbirth in antiquity was attended primarily and normally by females, midwives or relatives, who thus acquired a substantial amount of experience and familiarity with the behavior and condition of a newborn child. In many instances, especially cases where the child's condition was unclear, an attending midwife or female relative would be consulted. But what if a slightly defective, lame, or somewhat premature son was born to a family with no male heir? The decision to rear or not to rear would hardly have been an easy one.

Just how carefully a newborn child was examined and with what care the decision as to its physical viability was made would surely have depended in part on just how much the child was wanted. The medical or physical criteria, therefore, although distinct from those of illegitimacy, of "too many months," or of undesirable sex, cannot be separated from them entirely.

[32] Soranus, *Gynecology* II.6, transl. O. Temkin (Baltimore 1956).

B. The Illegitimate Child

The illegitimate newborn child was also clearly at high risk in ancient Greek society. The killing or abandonment of a child born to an unmarried mother or to parents not married to each other is a familiar theme.[33] Such a child, male or female, had at best a marginal share in the social and political life of the *polis*; he or she stood at the boundary between insider and outsider, not belonging properly to either. Identity was given by the family, and without a recognized father and family, the child had no proper guardian (*kurios*) since its mother could not legally fulfill such a function. Without a father, the child had no true place in the patrilineal kin structure, no right to the family name. (Hippolytus, the illegitimate son of Theseus, took his name from Hippolyta, his Amazon mother. From the fourth century there is the case of Boiotos *or* Mantitheos son of Mantias, who won in court the right to the legitimate name Mantitheos [his paternal grandfather's name] instead of Boiotos, the name of his maternal uncle.)[34]

In practice, the illegitimate child might find a place in another household, his mother's family or in his mother's husband's family. In the world of myth and epic we hear of illegitimate sons reared in their own father's household; Hippolytus was brought up in the household of Theseus, and Odysseus in a story he tells Eumaios claims to be the illegitimate son of a rich man and his concubine who nonetheless was treated as true-born (*Odyssey* 14.200ff.). In classical Athens, however, where the evidence is most abundant *and* where ownership of land was a strictly guarded right of the citizen, an illegitimate son could not, as such, inherit property and would have been in an uncomfortable position living within his father's household.[35] Solon may have allowed a father to give a bastard some bit of property as a "bastard's share" (*notheia*); he also, in the interest of stabilizing the property-holding system in Athens, strictly excluded him from the group of kin able to inherit.[36]

[33] Athenian New Comedy, in keeping with its wish-fulfillment character, often provides a happy ending to stories of a young woman's seduction and her child's exposure (e.g., Menander's *Epitrepontes*). Euripides' *Ion* follows the same story lines, although in this case the seducer is Apollo himself, and a "happy ending" is provided, if not by the marriage of the natural parents, then at least by the adoption of the illegitimate child by his mother's husband.

[34] Demosthenes 39, 40; Cf. J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford 1971) 364–68.

[35] The presence of an illegitimate son was threatening to legitimate sons, as well as to the legitimate sons' mother. An illegitimate daughter might present less of a threat, *unless* she became an *epiklêros* (heiress of her father's estate). See the interesting case of Phile, an illegitimate daughter of Pyrrhus whose status is at issue in Isaeus 3.

[36] See Harrison (above, note 8) 1.61–68; MacDowell (above, note 6) 91–94.

When the mother was young and unmarried (Aristophanes' "maiden muse"), *perhaps* the most common situation in which illegitimacy occurred,[37] the child was for better or worse in the hands of its mother and mother's family. Euripides represents Creusa's decision to expose her newborn child by Apollo as motivated by her "fear of her mother" and carried out without the knowledge of either parent (*Ion* 898, 14–15). Just how she kept her pregnancy a secret is hard to imagine; Apollo apparently helped out by making the birth easy (1596). In the face of strong familial and societal disapproval and of a bleak economic and social future for the child, many women bearing an illegitimate child may have chosen not to rear it, although perhaps not to the extent imagined by moralists. The phenomenon is well known today, when the disabilities of illegitimacy for both mother and child are considerably less.

On the other hand, there would most likely have been a demand for healthy infants in antiquity.[38] Given that women communicated with other women in carrying out household duties or during religious festivals *and* that childbirth and child care were female responsibilities, it is possible that there may have been something of a "feminine network" which could place an unwanted infant in the hands of a woman wanting to be a mother. Aristophanes' "child" was picked up and reared by someone else. Certainly "exposing" an infant on a doorstep increases its chances of survival. More to the point, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, we hear a story of a suppositious child, perhaps illegitimate or at least unwanted, whisked into the "labor room" of its new mother under the "unperceiving" nose of its "father" (502ff.; cf. 340, 407). Women might know both those about to have an unwanted child and those who wanted a child but did not (or could not) have one.

C. "Too Many Mouths"

If we turn now to the matter of healthy, legitimate infants and to the practice of infanticide owing to poverty or to a desire to be rid of unwanted female children, it is even less possible to make categorical

[37] This is the situation emphasized most in literature. Illegitimacy as the result of adultery is talked of less often. The term *nothos* (bastard) as used by Homer refers to the child of a man (aristocrat) and his concubine, i.e., a child born of parents of *unequal* status. Inequality, as much as absence of matrimony, may be important to the original meaning of the term.

[38] It should be emphasized that Greek families did not have significant *positive* control over family size. The conception of the child could at times be prevented, the fetus aborted, or the newborn exposed, but there was little reliable help when children were not conceived, not carried to term, or not born healthy. Note that medical writing on such matters is overwhelmingly pro-natalist, although advice could always be taken the other way (see the article of A. Preuss, "Biomedical Techniques for Influencing Human Reproduction in the Fourth Century B.C.," *Arethusa* 8 [1975] 237–63). In this situation, a healthy child male or female would not, I think, be routinely exposed in hopes of getting something better next time.

statements of cause and effect[39] or motive and rationale. Perhaps a good place to begin is Hesiod's advice on family size.

> One single-born son would be right to support his father's house, for that is the way substance piles up in the household; if you have more than one, you had better live to an old age; yet Zeus can easily provide abundance for a greater number, and the more there are, the more work is done and increase increases. (*Works and Days* 376–81, transl. Lattimore)

The first lines are often quoted in support of a Greek desire for small families, but the second part, less often noted, turns about and admits that many children can be an economic advantage. A man's (and woman's) attitude on which course to follow might well depend on what sort of business or work he (she) did. A craftsman practicing his craft in the city, a merchant carrying on long-distance trade, or a mercenary soldier might not have wanted or been able to use the help of numerous sons or daughters, but children of farmers and/or shepherds would, as Hesiod emphasizes, have work to do. While the desire for *some* children is characteristic of virtually all Greek families—for the maintenance of the family line and of family cults and for the care of parents in their old age—views on the optimum number will certainly have varied according to class and occupation. Further, given the uncertainties of survival in infancy and early childhood, a family might rear more than the desired number in an attempt to guard against childlessness.

It is sometimes claimed quite casually that Greek families were forced to practice infanticide because of poverty.[40] Exposure for this reason is mentioned in Greek sources,[41] but the explanation does not hold up in all respects. First, the cost of rearing a child in antiquity would have been considerably less than in the modern world, viewed as a proportion of family resources. Food and clothing were the primary expenses; these were generally simple and might be produced at home. Although completely destitute persons might not raise a child, for a "poor" working man (a *penêtês*)[42] the cost of rearing a child could be less

[39] Cf. Teichman, *Illegitimacy* (Ithaca 1983) 22 on the difficulty of determining a "cause" for illegitimacy. She comments that while the best that can be done is to establish that the causes are "multifarious," the very appreciation of this diversity of cause may be in itself useful and significant.

[40] This is the common "defense" (the other side of "overpopulation") and remains an underlying assumption of many arguments on the topic. See note 30 above.

[41] Menander, *Epitr.* 254–55, *Perik.* 811–12; Plutarch, *Moralia* 497E (reporting a law from Ephesus forbidding infanticide "unless the feet were swollen because of hunger"; cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 497). Aelian (*V.H.* 2.7) recorded a Theban law forbidding exposure of the *paidion* unless the father was extremely poor (see below, p. 122).

[42] See M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (California 1973) 41 for the meaning of *penêtês*; he was not a pauper but one who had to work for his living.

significant than the economic value of his (her) labor, once he (she) was out of early childhood. Although it might seem paradoxical, a strong concern about the dangers of dividing the family property through partible inheritance and of diminishing its assets through dowries for daughters seems more characteristic of families with moderate and large estates than of those with almost nothing. Indeed, wealthier classes would have had more reason and occasion to practice infanticide, since they would be more concerned about a diminished estate, less interested in child labor, and—owing to the better diet (one supposes) for the female members—more prolific and more likely to produce healthy children. The rich, not the poor, are the main target of criticism from moralists such as Polybius for their refusal to rear children (*Histories* 36.17).

Another often repeated reason or explanation for Greek infanticide is that of population pressure—"a terror looming larger every year,"[43] the same population pressure which "caused" Greek colonization in the eighth and seventh centuries or Pericles' citizenship law in 451/0 B.C. But such explanations should not go unexamined. The patterns of demographic change for a pre-industrial or pre-modern population differ in significant ways from those of a modern population. Modern experience with rapid population growth should not, but sometimes does, affect our view of the situation in ancient Greece. I have discussed this issue elsewhere[44] and only emphasize here that there is no evidence that Greeks perceived population *growth*—as opposed to population balance—as a persistent problem.[45] Further, while we can certainly talk productively about the demographic behavior of populations as a whole in relation to fertility, life expectancy, or levels of mortality, it is another matter to generalize about the behavior of the individual family in regard to its own children. If, for example, the economy and population of Athens were in fact growing rapidly in the fifth century, would an individual family decide it was time to restrict its own numbers? The individual does not always act in his society's best interests even if he can discern just what those interests might be. While the philosopher or political scientist might speculate on optimum numbers and attempt to regulate the size of families (to prevent there being either too many or too few citizens in his model state)[46] the individual might take the

[43] Zimmern (above, note 2) 326, quoted above p. 112.

[44] C. B. Patterson, *Pericles Citizenship Law of 451/0 BC* (New York 1981) 40–81.

[45] It is important to observe that Plato and Aristotle were concerned to keep their model populations in *balance* with the model city's resources. The balance was a delicate one in Greek cities with limited means but definite requirements of manpower for defense and government. See Plato, *Laws* 740E–741A, for provisions for dealing with too many (colonization) or too few (select immigration).

[46] See Naomi and Martin Golding, "Population Policy in Plato and Aristotle: Some Value Issues," *Arethusa* 8 (1975) 345–58.

"worm's-eye view." He and she would marry when times were good, stay single (or not stay single) when times were not so good. In third-century Greece, there was apparently simultaneous population decline, large scale emigration, *and*, if we trust Polybius (36.17), more noticeable practice of exposure.

D. The Unwanted Female

Finally, in addition to the problems inherent in determining the effects of wealth and numbers on the attitudes of individual families, there remains the issue of the extent to which Greeks exposed and killed female offspring. That Greeks did practice preferential female infanticide seems often to be taken for granted, as is a corresponding unequal sex ratio,[47] but a "sexist" motive for infanticide is no less complex and difficult to generalize about than are those resulting from poverty or "overpopulation." At the outset it must be emphasized that the well-recognized strain of misogyny in Greek thought cannot be used *per se* to bolster arguments for the prevalence of female infanticide. The main *animus* of Greek misogyny is against the *gyne*/wife (see Hesiod and Semonides), not the female in general or the daughter in particular. Hesiod's *Works and Days* illustrates this well. While Hesiod is firm in his belief that women (wives) in the form of Pandora brought the end of the golden age for men, and warns continually against the bad wife, who

> even though her husband be a strong man, ... burns him dry
> without fire and gives him to a green old age (704–5),

he also describes in quite lyrical terms the virgin daughter within the house in the depths of winter:

> It [the North wind] does not blow through the soft skin of a
> young maiden
> who keeps her place inside the house by her loving mother
> and is not yet initiated in the mysteries of Aphrodite
> the golden, who washing her smooth skin carefully and
> anointing it
> with oil, then goes to bed, closeted in an inside chamber....
> (*Works and Days* 519–24, transl. Lattimore)

The problem is marriage and the economic burdens it brings, not women of and by themselves. "Do not let any sweet talking woman beguile your good sense with the fascination of her shape. It's your barn she's after" (*Works and Days* 373–74).

[47] E.g., Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece* (Stanford 1980) 111. The chapter on Athenian and Spartan women in M. Guttentag and P. Secord, *Too Many Women?* (Beverly Hills 1983) has little new to offer on this issue.

Virgin daughters, on the other hand, a man's own flesh and blood, were not a problem for the male head of the household in the same way. Indeed, they could be considered part of the wealth and resource of the household. A prominent theme in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus is the trampling upon wealth or valuable things that ought not to be trampled upon, and one of these treasures is certainly Iphigeneia, the daughter sacrificed by Agamemnon for the sake of his campaign against Troy.[48] Greek drama is characterized by conflict between husband and wife, father and son, but the relation of father and daughter is one of mutual love and devotion; Agamemnon and Iphigeneia are not an exception here.[49] Although it is true that daughters brought the need for dowries, the dowry usually consisted of movable goods and would not therefore diminish the long-term value of the family estate as would the sons' taking of their inheritance. Thus, the economic argument, simply understood, would actually suggest limiting the number of sons, not daughters. Further, marriageable daughters were a valuable social and political asset, since a marriage could cement friendships and alliances between families.

Undeniably, there were situations in which a daughter was undesirable and unwanted. I do not deny that the Egyptian mercenary Ilarion instructed his wife in the first century B.C. to rear a male child but expose a female child (*P. Oxy.* IV 744); but such a situation, even if it had been that of a fifth century Greek, cannot be generalized.[50] (See the comments on mercenaries above, p. 111.)

Nonetheless, an unequal sex ratio (favoring males) seems to me quite likely in ancient Greece. The differing customary ages at marriage might suggest this was the case (above, p. 108), although there were other factors influencing social practice, such as the need for a husband to be *kurios tôn heautou* (master of his own property) or a desire to catch a woman early when she was malleable and less of a threat (see Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.4ff., or Hesiod, *Works and Days* 699). Still, outright female infanticide is not the only way of producing such imbal-

[48] *Agamemnon* 1551–59; cf. 341–42, 366–72, 914–30.

[49] A prominent and highly positive father/daughter relationship is that of Oedipus and his daughters (*O.T.*, *O.C.*, *passim*).

[50] Poseidippos' statement

> Every man rears a son even if he is poor,
> but a daughter he exposes even if he is rich (Kock 11)

is often quoted on this issue, e.g., by Tarn (above, note 2) 101 and, although in a serious mistranslation, by Preuss (above, note 38) 263. But the implications of this "jingle" for the social reality of third century Greece are far from clear. It might be taken as reflecting a particular *urban* attitude devaluing the economic contribution of women. Cf. Sheila Johansson, "Deferred Infanticide: Excess Female Mortality during Childhood," *Infanticide, Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives* (above, note 22) 463–85.

ance. There might also be a subtle, perhaps unthinking favoring of the male child in its physical care and nourishment.[51] Indeed, such an entrenched bias is revealed in the statement of Aristophanes' "feminist" in the *Lysistrata*, who protests that she also contributes to the common good of the city since she produces *men* (651). There is some evidence that except in Sparta female children generally received less food than males (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans* 1.3) and Aristotle apparently justified social practice with his claim that females needed less food (*HA* 9.608B15). In addition, in times of shortage, females would be the first to go hungry. Women were also the primary caretakers of the sick, a female virtue referred to by Neaira's accusers; that she nursed her sick husband is the only good thing the speaker can say about Neaira's daughter ([Demosthenes] 59.56). Women were thus more continually exposed to disease. Certainly the primarily outdoor life of men was freer from disease and infection than the indoor life of women. The effect of warfare on male life expectancy cannot match that of these persistent and pervasive realities of female life; further, warfare will also have brought increased risk of epidemic or famine to the nonfighting portion of the population.

Taken together, such considerations suggest that the life expectancy of female infants in ancient Greece *was* less than that of the male,[52] and female infanticide can be considered at most only a partial factor determining any imbalance between the sexes. Until we have convincing positive evidence that in fact female infanticide was prevalent, we should not assume that it was. Whether or not the difference in life expectancy was five years (as Golden suggests, above, note 2, pp. 323–24) seems undeterminable and perhaps irrelevant. What seems more important and worth talking about is how a numerical and cultural imbalance might affect the lives of ancient women and their relations with men, their families, and their cities.

### E. The Foundling

Before concluding, there remains one important situation to consider, one which has in fact been implicit from the start—and from the initial comments on the language of "exposure." This is the case of the *threptos*, the infant who is taken up and reared by a stranger. However often this happened—foundlings are clearly more common on the comic stage than in the world outside the theater[53]—the potentiality of its occurrence confounds any simple numerical calculation of the cause and

[51] On this point, see Johansson (above, note 50).

[52] Cf. the life tables constructed on the basis of skeletal material from Roman Hungary by B. Frier, "Roman Life Expectancy: the Pannonian Evidence," *Phoenix* 37 (1983) 328ff.

[53] See the plot summaries provided by Murray (above, note 28) 46ff.

effect of Greek "exposure" of infants. Some infants survived or were perhaps exposed in a manner conducive to their survival. I offer here only a few comments on the likely positions of rearer and reared. First, it is significant that the new parents are usually childless and often poor;[54] they are people who want and/or have use for children. Second, a *lucky* foundling might be brought up as a legitimate heir or even a prince (Oedipus), but less happy results were also possible. The pseudo-Demosthenic speech against the prostitute Neaira reveals that she and other prostitutes were taken up as young infants and reared for prostitution by their Corinthian "mother" (59.18; cf. the plot of Terence's *Heautontimorumenos*, in which an exposed child is reared by a prostitute, but remains virtuous and at the end is shown to be of free birth). And Ion in Euripides' *Ion* has been brought as a temple servant at Delphi. An undated (Hellenistic?) law from Thebes quoted without context by Aelian (*V.H.* 2.7) provided that unwanted infants, male or female—in this case unwanted because of the parents' poverty—be first entrusted to the magistrates and then turned over to anyone willing to pay those officials a small price. When the child has grown "the rearer takes its servitude in exchange for the rearing." It is significant here that the parent does not *sell* the child. It is apparently worth very little until a potential owner invests the cost of its rearing. As in the case of adoption, a child must be somewhat grown to be worth something to a potential owner (or parent). Thus, exposed infants could, eventually, provide a source both of domestic slaves[55] and of children for those with an economic or psychological need. Whatever their number, the *threptoi* are an important part of the "underside" of Greek society[56] as well as of any consideration of the Greek practice of infant exposure.

In conclusion, I return to the arguments of the opening paragraphs of this paper. What do we want to know about the practice of exposing newborn infants in Greece and how does our evidence bear on what we want to know? A recent article prefaced its main argument with the comment that " . . . it is hazardous to set the extent of any social practice by reference to scattered casual remarks in literary sources. We need a more quantitative method."[57] To me, this is barking up the

[54] E.g., King Polybus and Queen Merope, who reared Oedipus, were childless; a poor shepherd and his wife, who had recently given birth to a stillborn child, reared Cyrus; and an old woman took up the twins exposed in Menander's *Perikeiromene*.

[55] On this point see W. H. Harris, "Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trades," *MAAR* 36 (1980) 121–24.

[56] Despite their different context and later date, Pliny's letters from Bithynia to Trajan (10.65, 66) on the problem of *threptoi* are an interesting commentary on this special class of people.

[57] Golden (above, note 2) 317.

wrong tree. What we need is a clearer appreciation of just what the sources do suggest, along with a realization that to establish the importance of exposure is not the same thing as to establish its extent in quantitative terms, or its rate of occurrence. Although there are, as I have tried to show, patterns and probabilities associated with the practice of exposure, there are also crucial ambiguities, best illustrated perhaps by conflicting attitudes towards the economic value of children. Further, within discernible patterns, exposure remains an individual act carried out by individual families in individual circumstances. Recent arguments about theoretically possible rates add little to our understanding of those circumstances, but ancient writers do provide rare glimpses into personal attitudes and feelings. *Even if* we had a record of "thrice ten thousand" infanticidal deaths in ancient Greece each year, Plato's metaphorical question to the new "parent" in the *Theaetetus* would still be illuminating for the historian:[58]

> Do you think an infant of yours must be reared in any case and not exposed? Will you bear to see him put to the proof, and not be in a passion if your first born should be taken away? (161A)

[58] This paper was read in an earlier form at Bard College in October, 1982. In recasting it into its present form I have benefited from the comments and suggestions of Charles Reed, Seth Schein, Robert Bauslaugh, Richard Patterson, and the editor and referee of *TAPA*.