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**NON EST MEA PIGRA SENECTUS: OLD WOMEN AND FOLK  
MEDICINE IN GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract:* This paper will examine the old-woman healer figure through Greco-Roman literary sources. First, I will discuss briefly the social reputation of old women in comparison with *senex* and the creation of a negative stereotype around them. After that, I will focus on the triple relation between woman, old age, and medicine in order to show the reputation of old women as skilled healers. Finally, I will analyse the use of different treatments close to magic, like enchantments and purifications, and the healings of some specific illnesses, such as love, to conclude with a brief overview of the political and social attitude towards them.

*Keywords:* old women, folk medicine, Greco-Roman magic, *praecatrix*.

It is said that as soon as we start running out of time our priorities shift and we start getting a better understanding of the true value of things. It is only when we grow old, and feel death inching closer, that we reach our full maturity and can reap the fruits of our experience. Ancient Romans were well aware of this, as shown by Ovid: *seris venit usus ab annis* («experience comes with riper years», *Ov., Met.* VI, 29). This quote is a good example of the unbreakable relationship between wisdom and old age, and the profound respect that Roman society professed towards its *maiores*. Back then, elders were seen as the embodiments of proper conduct and as role models for the young. Thus, in his apology of senescence, Cicero makes use of Cato to highlight the ideals of a life stage not exempt of worldly pleasures and the «reflection, reason and judgement» of the *senex*, among many other qualities (*Cic., Sen.* 19).<sup>2</sup> However, it should not be surprising that in a work with such a scope there it is no mention of their female counterparts, the old women or *anus*. Their absence is somewhat justified, owing to the widespread aversion with which they were regarded, even more so in a text that was supposed to sing the praises of old age. Indeed, the sources' depiction of the *senex* as a beacon of tradition and exponent of the old customs (*mos maiorum*)

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<sup>2</sup> Finley 1981, 168–169; Parkin 2003, 61.

contrasts sharply with that of the *anus*, whose teachings frequently constitute a source of danger and immorality. As pointed out by F. Mencacci, «nessuna delle conoscenze della *anus* sembra essere considerata utile e quello che essa ha da offrire è presentato sempre come un sapere svilito e comunque marginale».<sup>3</sup>

The ancient grammarians' theories regarding the etymological origin of the term *anus* remark this negative image of old women, as shown by Festus, who proposed it to be derived from the Greek adjective ἄνοος, «mindless» (Fest., 25–27 L).<sup>4</sup> This aversion towards women of an advanced age corresponds to their infertility, since according to the social standards of that time, a woman who could not bear children was as useful as a cartwheel with no wheels.<sup>5</sup> This biological dysfunction and its resulting social repercussions were accompanied by the fear caused by such an ambiguous, and hence dangerous, being like an elder woman. As observed by A. Richlin, one of the reasons why these women caused such apprehension was because they did not fit in any of the established social categories: they could not be strictly considered *matronae*, but they did not serve the function that was traditionally assigned to daughters either.<sup>6</sup> This process of outcasting ended up causing the creation of a literary stereotype that was conformed of the most hated behaviours and attitudes of the time, such as lust, expressed by the archetypical *anus libidinosa*, or alcoholism, portrayed by the *anus ebria*.<sup>7</sup> In this way, old women became a sort of blank canvas in which typically masculine fears and anxieties were projected.<sup>8</sup>

The most remarkable of these negative qualities (lust, drunkenness, decrepitude...) is, without a shadow of a doubt, the one regarding the association of old women with the world of magic and superstition, ever since ancient times.<sup>9</sup> The Hittites used the term *hasuwas* to refer to «hags», which literally means «old women».<sup>10</sup> Something similar happened in the Greco-Roman world, where the use of γράια and *anus* as synonyms for «witch» was commonplace.<sup>11</sup> An excerpt

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<sup>3</sup> Mencacci 2006, 157.

<sup>4</sup> Latin lexicon also refers to the *anilia fatuitas amentia* (CGL IV 480,8). The root \*an- appears frequently in indoeuropean languages, most of the time in terms used to refer to old people, like *han*, which meant «grandmother» in Armenian, or *anyta*, «mother in law» in Lithuanian (Vaan 2008, 45).

<sup>5</sup> Bremer 2008, 290; Casamayor 2016, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Richlin 1987, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Dimartino 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Rosivach 1994, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Bremer 2008, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Álvarez-Pedrosa 2004, 22.

<sup>11</sup> There are many examples in literature: Theocr., *Id.* VI, 39–40; VII, 126–127; Pl., *Cist.* 290; Afran., *Vop.* 14; Tib., I 8,18; Hor., *Epod.* V, 98; S. I 9,30; Ov., *Am.* I 8,2; I 14,40; *Rem.* 254; *Fast.* II,571; VI,142; Petr., 133,4; 136,1; Mart., IX 29; Plut., *De superst.* 166a; Lucian., *Dial. meretr.* IV,1; Apul., *Met.* I 7,7; II 20,3; Heliod., *Aeth.* IV 5,3; VI 14, 3, etc. Cicero sets an etymological

from Diodorus perfectly demonstrates the close relationship between magic and old women that was prevalent in ancient times. In it, Medea murders king Pelias after appearing in his palace under the guise of a priestess of Hecate. Wanting her sorceress disguise to be believable, Medea magically dyed her hair to make it seem greying and covered her face and body with wrinkles «so that all who looked upon her thought that she was surely an old woman» (πρεσβῦτιν, Diod. Sic., IV 51,1). Similarly, in Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, the priest Calasiris pretends to be a healer specialized in casting the evil eye and, just like Medea, makes an effort to imitate the gestures and manners typical of «old women» (γραιῶδες, Heliod., *Aeth.* IV 5,3).

However, this excerpt reveals an important detail. The archetypical old woman portrayed by Calasiris differs greatly from the stereotypical lewd, drunken and ugly hag: he portrays the old woman as a healer. As previously mentioned, the most commonly seen image in literary sources is that of the witch versed in love spells (Hor., *Epod.* V; Ov., *Am.* I 8; 14, 40; Quint., *Decl.* 385; Lucian., *Dial. meretr.* 4,1) and gifted with sinister powers, like being able to summon spirits (Ov., *Rem.* 254; Heliod., *Aeth.* VI 14,3), transforming into animals (Ov., *Fast.* VI 142) or mutilating corpses (Apul., *Met.* II 20,3). Horace's Canidia and Lucan's Erictho are good examples of this common portrayal. But occasionally we can also see old women who use their knowledge with kinder purposes, like divination (Hor., *S.* I 9,30; Petr., 137,10), or getting rid of curses (Theocr., *Id.* VI 39–40; VII 126–127).<sup>12</sup> There are many old female healers in this group, and even though their methods are, essentially, the same as those of the most despicable witches in literature (charms, herbs, sacrifices, etc.), their dedication to medicine resulted in a more neutral, even positive, characterization.

To tell the truth, the role of women as healers is deeply rooted. First, anthropological research has revealed the active involvement of women in the search of herbs with nutritional and medicinal end.<sup>13</sup> While culture and civilization have traditionally been associated with masculinity, nature has always been seen as female symbol.<sup>14</sup> This means that women had a close relationship with their surroundings, which allowed them to perceive the supernatural virtues of all kinds of plants, herbs, roots, rocks and animal-derived substances.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the fact

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connection between the verb *sagire* («to perceive keenly») and the noun *saga* («witch») and links it to old women: «Accordingly certain old women are called *sagae*, because they are assumed to know a great deal» (Cic., *Div.* I 65).

<sup>12</sup> Migdal 2014, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Slocum 1975, 47; Sharp 1986, 244.

<sup>14</sup> Ortner 1974, 72.

<sup>15</sup> It should be pointed out that ancient civilizations did not make our current distinction between the «natural» and the «supernatural». Thus, processes that seem logic and rational from our perspective, such as the effects a medicine has in our body, were perceived by them as the

that women were regarded as inferior to men and only trusted with menial chores meant that they acquired skills related to the raising of children, a task taken upon by the mothers themselves as well as any other women in the household.<sup>16</sup> Among these women was the nursemaid, a critically important figure regarding the upbringing of the children, and who appears in the sources as an old woman with an expertise in all kinds of magical healing. Thus, Ovid narrates how Myrrha's nursemaid made use of several remedies to relieve her of her ailments: «If it be madness, I have healing-charms and herbs; or if someone has worked an evil spell on you, you shall be purified with magic rites; or if the gods are wroth with you, wrath may be appeased by sacrifice» (Ov., *Met.* X 394–399).

This gives us an idea of the breadth of knowledge amassed by these old healers, who seem to know of a different kind of treatment for every disease. Nonetheless, while I am not aiming to deny this wide knowledge,<sup>17</sup> several authors point to an exceptional level of specialization on the application of determined treatments and the healing of particular diseases. The sources report the existence of women who, in conjunction with more standard methods such as the use of herbs, ointments and amulets, were specialized in the purification of illnesses using methods opposed to those of traditional medicine.<sup>18</sup> For example, Propertius mentions a witch from Thessaly who tried to remove her love by drowning him in the sea, following the ritual of *lustratio* (Prop., III 24,10).<sup>19</sup> In any case, the use of purging substances was seen more frequently. Such is the case in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, where the poet recommends lovers to hire an *anus* to purify

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manifestation of a hidden, divine power. Augustine of Hippo was one of the first intellectuals to outline this double standard: «For it is one thing to say, 'if you bruise down this herb and drink it, it will remove the pain from your stomach', and another to say, 'if you hang this herb round your neck, it will remove the pain from your stomach'» (August., *Doc. Christ.* II, 29).

<sup>16</sup> Shepherd 1989, 21. Due to the huge rate of maternal mortality, newborns were normally taken care of by their aunts and grandmothers, cf. Pers., II 30–35: «See how a granny (*avia*) or an auntie (*matertera*) who fears the gods, takes baby out of his candle, skilled in averting the evil eye». Ausonius paid tribute to his maternal aunt, Aemilia Hilaria, by praising her prowess to practice medicine «as men» (*more virum medicis artibus*, Auson., *Parent.* 6,6).

<sup>17</sup> Camps i Gasset 2000, 330.

<sup>18</sup> Dickie 2001, 246. The Hippocratic Corpus criticize the behaviour of purificators (καθαρμοί), claiming their proximity to magic and the inconsistent nature of their theory. If, as they say, disorders such as epilepsy had a «divine» origin, they would be impossible to cure using «human» means (Hippoc., *Morb. sacr.* 3).

<sup>19</sup> In a fragment of the comedy *Phasma*, Menander refers to a group of women who did purification rituals in a spring with salt and lentils (Men., *Phasm.* 54–56). Likewise, the witch Circe charmed away her nightmares by putting her head under sea water (Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* IV, 665; Apollod., *Bibl.* II 9, 24).

their beloved's bed with «sulphur and eggs» (Ov., *Ars.* II 329–330).<sup>20</sup> Some scholars have used this and other similar texts as proof of the existence of a specific kind of female healer specialized in purification through eggshells.<sup>21</sup> M. Dickie directly links them with the *dematriculae*, elder women who, according to Augustine of Hippo, visited the houses of sick people to purify them with wax and eggs (August., *Serm.* 335D, 5).<sup>22</sup> However, their name, derived from the same root as *matrex* («womb»),<sup>23</sup> seems to fit well with a user of uterine magic. Nevertheless, the lack of records makes difficult going beyond this hypothesis.

In addition to purification rituals, old women healers also had a taste for enchantments. In Ancient societies it was a common belief that the spoken word had a great influence over people's minds, not only because of their persuasive and conative faculties, but also because the simple act of pronouncing a speech or casting a spell were performative actions themselves.<sup>24</sup> From this point of view, the spoken word had enough power to alter reality, influence natural elements and cure diseases,<sup>25</sup> so it should not be a surprise that figures like Cato pronounce spells to cure their injuries (Cato., *Agr.* 160) or that Marcellus Empiricus recommend the use of such formulae to cure diseases like gout (Marcell., *med.* 36, 70).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his critique to γόητας, the playwright Diphilus mocks the old women who performed purification rituals with a wide variety of strange materials, such as a torch, a squill, sea water, tar and sulphur (Clem. Al., *Strom.* VII 4.26,3).

<sup>21</sup> Martial speaks about the cathartic properties of eggs in an epigram where he complains about having ran out of eggs because of a *saga* who puts charms on dreams (Mart., VII 54). Juvenal also describes an eunuch who, due to his expertise in purifications, visited the homes of rich women to purge the diseases typical of Autumn and presented an offering of one hundred eggs to the gods (Juv. VI 517). Furthermore, Pliny states that breaking egg and snail shells helps against the evil eye (Plin. *Nat.* XXVIII 19).

<sup>22</sup> Dickie 2001, 310; Luck 2006, 510.

<sup>23</sup> *TLL* VIII, 475.

<sup>24</sup> Austin 1962, 6.; Tambiah 1979.

<sup>25</sup> Laín Entralgo, 1956. Belief in the healing powers of charms can be traced back to the *Odyssey*, where Autolykus' sons cure Ulysses' wound with a spell (Hom., *Od.* XIX, 457). More references can be found throughout the classic age (Pind., *Pyth.* III, 53; Pl., *Leg.* II, 659e; *Cha.* 155d...), coinciding with the expansion of the Hippocratic school, although the line separating magic and medicine was still blurry. An example of this is the tragedy *Ajax*, where the protagonist sees the use of the ἐπιφθῆ as typical for ἰατρός or professional medics (Soph., *Aj.* 582).

<sup>26</sup> Ferraces Rodríguez 2017. On a separate occasion, Marcellus Empiricus was reciting the formula while fasting and touching the affected area with the thumb, ring, and middle fingers (Marcell., *med.* 15, 11). Similarly, Varro describes a ritual to relieve foot aches by transferring them onto the ground, which consists on repeating a spell nine times while fasting, touching the ground and spitting (Var., *R.* I 2, 27). An example of folklore are the nursery rhymes mothers recite to their children when they hurt themselves: «hush, Little baby, don't you cry. Mama's going to sing you a lullaby» (English); «cura sana cura sana, sino se te cura hoy, se te curará mañana»

In Latin sources, old women with an understanding of healing spells are commonly called *praecantrices*.<sup>27</sup> Though the origin of this figure is lost to time, this term appeared for the first time in Plautine comedy, more precisely in a fragment of *Miles gloriosus*, where old Pericleptolemus rants about the wasteful spending habits of housewives and the money they spend on fortune tellers: «the enchantress (*praecantrix*), the dream interpreter, the clairvoyant, the soothsayer...that woman that tells your fortune from your eyebrows...» (Pl., *Mil.* 693–694).<sup>28</sup> In the context of the scene, the *praecantrix* seems to be closer to the realm of divination than of medicine. This should not come as a surprise if we take into account the etymology of the term and its relation with the verbs *praecano* («to foretell») and *praecino* («to predict»)<sup>29</sup> However, there is no evidence that would allow us to rule out their role as healers. Divination and medicine were not mutually exclusive and complemented each other frequently. For example, the Hittites made use of the services of oracles, most of whom were women, to diagnose diseases and establish a treatment.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the sources also speak of old women healers who used fortune telling to protect cattle of possible diseases, which makes it more likely that the *pracaenrix* in Plautus’s text plays a similar role.

After the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, *pracaenrices* were linked inseparably to the field of medicine, as shown by Varro and Cicero. The former establishes a link between the power of the spells (*praecantor*) and the medicine of Serapis (Var., *Men.* 152.1). Cicero, for his part, praises Epicurus’s gift of «healing with words» (*praecentet*) the venom of snakes, in a metaphorical acclaim of his doctrines (Cic., *Fin.* II, 94). Still, the best display of the work of a *pracaenrix* can be found in a poem written by Tibullus, where he reminisces of the time when he managed to cure his beloved by purifying her with sulphur and having an «old woman first chanting her magic spell» (*praecinuisset*, Tib., I 5, 11–12). The fact that Tibullus himself took care of everything save for the spells shows the levels of specialization achieved by the old woman healers. Their skills were a result of years of training, and each illness likely required a different formula, so not anyone

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(Spanish); «Heile, heile Segen, morgen gibt es Regen, übermorgen Sonnenschein, dann wirds wieder besser sein» (German), etc.

<sup>27</sup> The Latin root *can-*, which appears in the verbs *cano* and *canto*, is the same as in the Greek term *καναχέω* («to ring») and has the general meaning of «sing». Yet, in a ritual context it can also be translated as «cast a spell» (Vaan 2008, 87–88).

<sup>28</sup> Montero 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Burriss 1936, 144; Teitel 2014, 750.

<sup>30</sup> Álvarez-Pedrosa 2004, 17.

could have access to their expertise.<sup>31</sup> Maybe it was this secrecy what raised suspicions among some authors, who saw the *praecatrix* as a potentially dangerous woman who was not only able to cure diseases, but also to transmit them (Pomp. Porph., *In Hor. Carm.* I 27,21).

Leaving this matter aside, these accounts seem to prove the existence of several kinds of healers according to the treatments they used (herbs, amulets, purifications, spells...) Nevertheless, it still remains unclear if this transversal knowledge was channelled into different «specializations» and if, in a way, these old female healers were more willing to treat certain kinds of diseases. Unfortunately, the sources are not very explicit in regards to this point. We can deduce from the texts that the old female healers were able to treat a wide variety of physical and mental illnesses, as implied by Lucian in an excerpt of *Philopseudes*, where Deinomachus lists off several ailments healed by «old women» (γρᾶεις), such as periodic fevers, snake poison and swellings (Lucian., *Philops.* 9). Similarly, and as previously mentioned, their work as childrearers and housekeepers helped shape the development of a set of knowledge specialized in childhood disorders, with evil eye being among the most prominent, due to children's weakness against it (Pers., II 30–35).<sup>32</sup> It was also common for old female healers to treat diseases of a sexual nature, as seen in the *Satyricon*, where a «little old woman» (*anicula*) tries to give Encolpius his sex drive back with the help of threads, knots, spells and magic stones (Petr., 131, 4–7).<sup>33</sup> However, it may also be possible that her skill in this field is a result of the lusciousness that Romans attributed to old women in general, and therefore we are simply dealing with a literary stereotype.

This stereotype can also be seen in what is the most prominent medical specialty for old female healers: female related disorders and lovesickness. The few women in the Classical era who were able to work as professional doctors did so by working for the nobility as obstetricians. Some examples of such female doctors are Agnodice, Metrodora or Aemilia Hilaria, each one of them author of important gynaecological essays.<sup>34</sup> Popular knowledge about old female healers was mostly passed on orally,<sup>35</sup> so there are not many traces of them in the sources, but it is known that birth assistance was one of their main roles, especially if we

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<sup>31</sup> In communities close to the Appalachian Mountains, in the eastern United States, folk healers recite a different verse of the Old Testament depending on the disease being treated. (Wigginton 1973, 347).

<sup>32</sup> Alvar Nuño 2012, 76. The *bullā* that was worn around the neck had the function of protecting the user of possible magic attacks (Macr., I 6, 9–10).

<sup>33</sup> Setaioli 2000; Meseguer González 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Treggiari 1976, 86–87.

<sup>35</sup> Blanco Cesteros 2017, 105.

consider that many of them also worked as nursemaids. In that case, it makes sense that women would seek the help of fellow women and hire female healers, as it was easier to have a relation of mutual trust and understanding with them, which in turn helped them to treat more effectively the diseases more typical and intimate to women.<sup>36</sup>

In this vein, we should remember the advice given to Phaedra by her nursemaid when she saw her worried about something: «If your malady is one of those that are unmentionable, here are women to help set it to rights. But if your misfortune may be spoken of to men, speak so that the thing may be revealed to doctors» (Eur., *Hipp.* 293–296). That «unmentionable malady» (ἀπορρήτων κακῶν) is no other than love, because love was seen as a uniquely feminine disease, corresponding to women's supposedly passionate and impulsive character.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, since women were the only ones «affected» by love, it was their responsibility to find out what caused it and how to get rid of it. In that way, magic was one of the most common *remedia amoris* and was almost solely practiced by old sorceresses: «Since men would take too long to find a cure, we women have to use our own resources», finishes Phaedra's nursemaid, after offering to her mistress «magical chants», «soothing words» and «potions that cure love» (Eur. *Hipp.* 509–510).<sup>38</sup> Similarly, young Simaetha laments not having visited «old women» (γραίας) that would have freed her of the love she felt for Delphis (Theocr., *Id.* II, 91). But not everyone made the same mistake as Simaetha; Propertius, wishing to relieve his sorrow, hired an *anus* to put a spell on his dreams and erase the memory of his beloved Cynthia (Prop., II 4,15). Yet, her methods were ineffective, which left the poet with no option but to admit that

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<sup>36</sup> Funnily enough, nowadays both obstetrics and pediatrics are among the medicinal branches most preferred by women, at least since they have had access to university. In 2018, in some regions of Spain, women made up the 89% of the total of candidates for the degree in obstetrics and gynecology, and the 73% in pediatrics. These numbers are far above the global average, which is around 48% for all branches.  
<https://www.redaccionmedica.com/secciones/formacion/-que-especialidades-medicas-eligen-las-mujeres-en-el-mir-2018--6907>

<sup>37</sup> The view of women as easily disturbed beings was supported by a «scientific» consensus taken by medics and nature experts. For example, Aristotle defined «females» of any species as «impulsive» and heavily flawed beings: «Woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man» (Arist., *Hist. an.* 608b).

<sup>38</sup> However, this text is hard to interpret due to the ambiguity of the expression φίλτρα μοι θελεκτήρια ἔρωτος, which can mean both «to make disappear» (Aesch., *Supp.* 447; *Cho.* 670) and «to arouse» (Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* III, 33). Besides, the fact that Phaedra's nursemaid asks for one of Hippolitus's clothes or one of his hair locks raises the suspicion that she did not hope to cure love, but to strengthen it further, since the use of οὐσία or «entity» is a defining characteristic of attraction spells (Halleran 2004, 193).



«love alone loves no physician of its ill» (Prop., II 1.57).<sup>39</sup> To sum up, since love being regarded as a typically feminine disease, it was mainly treated by women with an understanding of magic healing, like the old women portrayed in literature. Thus, love was considered, together with other sexual and feminine ailments, as a line of work exclusive to old female healers.<sup>40</sup>

Having taken a look at the most defining characteristics of old female healers, it should be interesting to consider their reputation in the contemporary texts and public opinion. Judging by the surviving reports, we can safely assume that the activities linked to these old healers were met with disapproval by the authorities, although that does not mean they were illegal. Since they were not deemed as harmful or unhealthy, there was no need to pass any legislation outlawing them. This can be seen in a law passed under emperor Constantine's rule that only banned the «magic arts» that caused harm or incited lust, while allowing the «remedies for bodily health» and the rituals to protect harvest (*Cod. Theod.*, IX, 16.3).

However, this does not mean that old female healers or their clients were exempt of being subjected to persecution or public executions, due to how close their methods were to the fields of magic and superstition. Ammianus tells about the time emperor Constantine II issued an order which would punish with death any soldier who consulted with fortune tellers or that «used some old wife's charm to relieve pain» (*anile incantamentum*, Amm. Marc., XVI 8,2).<sup>41</sup> Some years later, an old woman (*anus*) who cured «intermittent fevers» was sentenced to death by the proconsul Festinus, even though she had cured his daughter a few days before (Amm. Marc., XXIX 2,26). While Ammianus's account of the events may not be completely accurate,<sup>42</sup> it still serves as a way to see how the actions of the old female healers were still associated with forbidden magic acts, to the

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<sup>39</sup> In Latin elegy, a poet's feelings are so intense that even magic is weak against them, and thus is ineffective when it comes to either stoke or calm down passion: Tib., I 5,43–44; I 8,24; Prop., II 4,7–8; II 28, 35–38; III 24, 10; Ov., *Ars* II 99–106; 415; *Med.* 35–42; *Rem.* 249–290; *Ep.* XII 163–168.

<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that medics of the time ignored that disease. Galen, for example, treated a woman who showed symptoms typical of love (pale skin, accelerated pulse, suffocation...) and diagnosed her with «psychological disturbance» (ψυχικῆς τινος ἀηδίας, Galen. *Prog.* 631). Soranus of Ephesus also understood the disease of love as an ailment of the spirit (I 7.30) as well as his fellow countryman Ruphus, who described it as a mental disorder (Pachoumi 2012, 77).

<sup>41</sup> The fear and uncertainty caused by war gave way to the popularity of wandering fortune tellers and magic users among soldiers. Thus, some generals included prophetesses and psychics among their ranks, as is the case of Alexander (Curt., VIII 6,16; Arr., *Anab.* IV 13,5) or Gaius Marius (V. Max., I 2,4; Frontin., *Str.* I 11,12; Plut., *Vit. Mar.* 17,1–5). Other generals were not so receptive and ordered their expulsion, such is the case of the Spartan king Cleomenes (Plut., *Vit. Cleom.* 12,4) and Scipio (App., *Hisp.* 14,85).

<sup>42</sup> Dickie 2001, 254.

point of using «old women's incantations» (*incantamenta anilia*) as false testimony to accuse an opponent and encourage his arrest (Amm. Marc., XXIX 2,3).

Apart from the authorities, old women healers also appeared as a threat to «scientific medicine», since they directly competed against them to attract clients. We can assume that for the common folk, the more traditional methods and knowledge of the old female healers were more accessible than the obtuse technicalisms and philosophical ponderings of medics from the Hippocratic school. In fact, Varro suggests that «most people prefer seeing the *praecantrices* rather than the *medici*» (Var., *Logist.* 15,1). Even today, magic can still be found as an alternative to traditional medicine, though if we take its primitive origin into account, we should be speaking of medicine as an alternative to magic. Pliny admits that for certain diseases «ordinary medicines are practically useless», and instead prefers «several of the magicians' remedies» (Plin., *Nat.* XXX 98). Polybius, however, found these methods «irrational» (*παρὰ λόγους*) and so was entirely dismissive of them. Still, he also considered it understandable when terminally ill people resorted to magic treatment, since «when all reasonable action has failed and we are still compelled to go on doing something, we must perforce resort to unreasonable courses» (Polyb., XXXIII 17,4).<sup>43</sup> Maybe if Polybius had experienced a slower, more painful death than what he actually had (according to sources, he fell from his horse), he would not have found sacrifices, amulets, spells and purifications as absurd as he did. Indeed, many relevant figures sought the treatment of old female healers in their deathbeds, like Pericles (Plut., *Vit. Per.* 38.2), Libanius (Lib., I 201) and the cynic philosopher Bion of Borysthenes (Diog. Laert., IV 54–57).

To conclude, Greco-Roman literary sources offer a closer impression of the relatively unknown figure of the old female healer. We have seen how old age in women represented, from the point of view of ancient societies, a source of dangerous and harmful knowledge, which resulted in the birth of a markedly negative literary stereotype. Only the women who made use of their skills with nobler goals, like the treatment of diseases, were able to avoid this negative image, although their use of methods closely related to magic, such as spells and purifications, meant that they still faced social stigmatization. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the texts we analyse are simply a reflection of the author's ideology, and the image of these women projected by the sources is still, to a greater or lesser extent, that of a stereotype. As is commonly known, stereotypes

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<sup>43</sup> In the same vein, Plutarch affirms that «when we suffer of chronic pains we tend to renounce to common treatments and customary diets and indulge ourselves in purification rituals, amulets, and dreams » (Plut., *De fac.* 920c).

tell us more about society's perception of a certain subject than about the subject's qualities themselves, so it is required that we take into account what we can learn from anthropology and folklore to gain a better understanding of the nature of the old female healers.

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