Stepmothers are notoriously wicked. Anyone, with any cultural literacy, whether derived from the Brothers Grimm themselves or from the large-screen Disney interpretations of their collected tales, knows that stepmothers are always out to destroy their stepchildren. In *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality*, Patricia Watson explores whether this prejudice against stepmothers, shared by the Greeks and Romans, had any basis in reality.

Watson takes a two-fold approach to the problem of the ancient stepmother, exploring various characters and situations as they are depicted in myth, and then trying to determine whether the portrait received from myth reflects contemporary sociological realities, primarily in 5th century Athens and late Republican-early Imperial Rome. The central chapters of her book then follow that organizing principle: II. Stepmothers in Greek Myth, III. Stepmothers in Classical Athens, IV. The *Saeva Noverca* in Roman Literature, V. Stepmothers in Roman Life. Chapter VI (Historical Figures: Livia, Agrippina and Octavia) tilts the balance slightly in favor of the Roman side, which admittedly has more evidence.

In her introduction, Watson surveys the general ancient stereotypes about stepmothers, carefully separating those that are common to both Athens and Rome, and those that seem to be specific to either culture. Watson sees in the stepmother stereotypes "an encapsulation of the negative traits assigned to females in general by a misogynistic tradition which flourished in Greece and Rome," (2) and in fact, makes throughout the book the important connections between the cultural suspicions about the female gender generally and the amplified examples the same suspicions locate specifically in the figure of the stepmother.

While both Greeks and Romans assumed malevolence on the part of stepmothers, the forms this malevolence takes were perceptibly different in the two societies. Watson contends that the murderous stepmother is peculiarly Roman,
particularly when she shows up as the *saeva noverca* of declamation. The amorous stepmother, however, of which Phaedra is the prime example, seems to be more typically found in Greek literature rather than in Latin. The stepmother/witch association, so familiar from European fairy-tales, also seems to appear more frequently in Roman sources than in Greek. While these nuances in the formation of the stereotype are significant, I find the common assumptions of the two cultures even more compelling. In both Greek and Latin, the noun “stepmother” (μητρυνά, *noverca*) through a derived adjective, passes into the general vocabulary as a synonym for “cruel” or “harsh”. *Noverca* became for the Gromatici (land-surveyors) a technical term indicating places risky for military encampment (4).

Watson’s arguments in her central chapters are clearly laid out, with subchapters and heading in an outline format. In the second chapter, “Stepmothers in Greek Myth,” she questions the mythic implications of the stepmother figure. Do the myths use the figure practically, to explore the problems of remarriage, or is the figure symbolic, an “anti-mother” who embodies the negative emotions that cannot be comfortably assigned to the true mother figure? (20) As she surveys the extant stepmothers of Greek myth (catalogue, with sources, in Appendix One), she assigns them to one of two categories: either the cruel or jealous stepmother, out to destroy her stepchildren; or the amorous stepmother. These categories are sufficient, as Watson notes, because no story survives in which the kindness of a stepmother is a major plot point (23). She expands her analysis of the cruel stepmother in order to determine the common thematic characteristics of stepmotherly malevolence; in the case of Euripides’ *Ion*, Watson demonstrates that some of the controversies in interpreting the play derive from Creusa’s shifting roles as wife, mother and stepmother. In concluding the chapter, Watson turns to the somewhat scantier evidence for stepfathers and step-siblings as *comparanda* for the stepmother role in myth. She continues this comparative approach regarding the members of the stepfamily throughout the central chapters of the book, strengthening her contention that the role of stepmother is unique.

In her third chapter, Watson investigates the historical evidence for the stepmother role in Classical Athens. It was, in fact, a social reality that stepmothers were common in Athenian society, although due to divorce at least as much as to death. Watson looks closely at the legal cases outlined in the Attic orators to find what little evidence there is for stepfamily relations, somewhat augmented by inscription. This chapter is perhaps the most frustrating of the book, but that is hardly Watson’s fault; the obscurity of the evidence makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. For example, on pp. 54-57, Watson considers the information related by SIG3 1168.13, the record of a cure from the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus. Afflicted with leeches, a young man slept in the temple, saw his cure effected in a dream, and went out from the temple in the morning, leeches in hand. The last line of the inscription claims that “he had swallowed them tricked by his stepmother, who had put them in a posset that he drank.” Watson is surely correct in seeing that last line as evidence of conflict between stepson and stepmother, but it is impossible to tell in which direction the line of conflict ran. If the story is accepted at face value, then the stepmother
attempted to harm the stepson; but it is equally possible that the leeches came from another source entirely; the stepmother may have given the young man a posset to alleviate his symptoms, after which he chose to claim that she tried to harm him. This survey of possibilities is Watson’s; no conclusion can be reached because of the nature of the evidence.

In fact, because there were no thrones at stake, contemporary Athenian behavior bore little resemblance to the stepfamily conflicts outlined in the myths. There was no right of primogeniture in Athenian inheritance laws, so there was no particular material advantage in a stepmother’s ridding herself of a stepson. As for the “amorous stepmother,” while Athenian marriage practices made it likely that second wives were often close in age to the offspring of their husbands’ first marriages, there simply is no evidence in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE for such intrafamilial romantic triangles. It is at this point that Watson posits a bias and questions its origins, turning to modern sociological studies of the stepfamily to shed light on the problem. Careful to “make the due allowance for differences in social mores,” she wishes to see the emotions and tensions of the modern stepfamily “to have existed in Athens as well” (73). As she admits in her own note to this statement, however, the evidence, which was scanty enough when just pressed for the existence of step-relationships, yields nothing about emotion. Furthermore, due to the restrictive nature of respectable women’s lives in Athens, we can know nothing of their feelings in these matters. Finally, the demographic differences between ancient stepfamilies and modern ones (modern stepmothers are less likely to be quite so close in age to their stepchildren; ancient stepfathers were less likely to share a household with their stepchildren, etc.) make the cross-cultural comparison tenuous at best.

Watson finds that the Romans refined the portrait of the malevolent stepmother in their literature. Stepmothers appear as characters at least 21 times in the extant Roman declamatory collections (93). Again, we are dealing with the literary stereotypes, rather than the historical evidence, but we see more poisoners in the Roman literature, and more attempts to disinherit rather than to murder a stepson. Phaedra shows up in Ovid and Propertius, where she is linked with the *venefica noverca* (2.1.51); Watson sees Seneca as much more sympathetic to Phaedra than Euripides had been, and notes that in Roman terms, a relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus would have been incest, technically, where in Athens it would not have been. The stepmother *par excellence* in Roman literature, however, is Juno. Watson devotes some 15 pages to careful readings of Juno in the two Hercules plays of the Senecan corpus; she assumes the *Oetaeus* to be Senecan, a question she admits is far from settled. In reading the two plays as a progressive triumph of Stoic *virtus over furor*, Watson claims that the prominence of the *saeva noverca* theme is appropriate because “the stereotypical stepmother encapsulates those qualities thought to be essentially feminine: emotional instability, lack of self-restraint, jealousy and treacherousness” (128).

When she turns to the evidence for “Stepmothers in Roman Life,” Watson is somewhat less constrained than she was in her chapter on Athens. Roman law made the possibility of stepmothers quite common, as children remained with their fathers in the event of either death or divorce. The age differences between husbands and wives, as in Athens, made it likely that stepmothers and sons were
coeval, but the Augustan marriage legislation specifically made such a union incestum (137). Again, the historical evidence for the “amorous stepmother” is as scanty in Rome as it was in Athens; the relative prevalence of the theme in literature, however, may reflect the “perceived danger” in these common situations of remarriage. The last part of this chapter, in which Watson surveys the burial inscriptions for the inclusion or exclusion of step-relations in the family tomb, is one of the most interesting and important parts of the book. Its usefulness is enhanced by the collection Watson makes in Appendix Four. The last of the central chapters of the book combines the features of the literary and historical considerations of Roman stepmothers by looking at the cases of Livia, Agrippina and Octavia, who, while being historical figures, are nonetheless used as literary stereotypes. Octavia, of course, is particularly remarkable in that she becomes a paradigm of virtue because of her role as a stepmother.

Watson’s Ancient Stepmothers is an admirable effort to collect and evaluate the evidence about a family role that has suffered bias from ancient world to our own. The appendices, in which Watson has carefully catalogued The Stepmother Myths and their sources (One), Origins of the Stepmother Myths (Two), The Stepmother in the Folktale (Three) and Establishing a List of Inscriptions (Four), are not only essential to her own analysis, but are a great service to other scholars who may be interested in the figure of the stepmother. While accessible to the general reader, with all quotations from ancient sources offered in both the original language and translation, this is more a book for specialists, and a welcome addition to the growing emphasis on family studies in the social history of the ancient world.

Laura Abrahamsen
Cleveland State University