

## ON SEMONIDES FRAGM. 7, FABLES AND OLD CREATION MYTHS

by

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The first censure on women in Western literature was written in the sixth or seventh century B.C. by the Greek poet Semonides of Amorgos<sup>1</sup>. His fragm. 7 describes in 118 iambic trimeters the creation of ten types of women out of eight different animals, the pig, the fox, the dog, the ass, the weasel, the horse, the ape and the bee, and two nature elements, sea and earth. The women thus created bear the characteristics of their origin, which means that all of them except for the bee woman, are pictured as mischiefs in the world, especially for the unfortunate husband who married them.

In spite of the poem's popularity in misogynistic circles, it has generally been considered by modern scholars as low-level and superficial entertainment for men in a male dominated society, performed at symposia and similar male occasions<sup>2</sup>. We must realize, however, that it is in fact also an authentic creation myth containing much that was familiar to the audience and revealing social attitudes and behaviours which were not new.

**"Chōris gynaikos theos epoiēsen noon ta prōta"**, the opening words of the poem, show very clearly its character of creation myth. The interpretation of these words has been the subject of discussion amongst scholars for a long time<sup>3</sup>. Most commentators translated them as "In the beginning God made woman's mind apart" or "separately" meaning "different from one another", hence the different types, or "different from man's mind". I prefer to translate it as "In the beginning God made mind apart from woman" or "without woman". This means that woman simply has no mind, that she was created second-hand out of irrational beings, much inferior to man who is endowed with the divine spirit, mind, reason, intelligence. This means that in no case can she be treated as equal to man or be expected to behave like man since she belongs to a different world, that of the animals and the elementary earth and water. It means also that woman appears only afterwards in a world which is already created and organized for man to live in accordance with the divine.

The appearance of woman destroys his harmony and this is when all trouble starts. Woman threatens man's security but at the same time he needs her<sup>4</sup>.

These ideas are deeply embedded in Greek mythological and cultural tradition. The first written traces of this tradition are to be found in the eighth century B.C. in the works of Hesiod. Because Prometheus, the trickster among the gods, deceived him in favour of mortal men, Zeus planned sorrow and mischief against them. He gave men:

as the price for fire an evil thing in which they may all be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction. . . . And he bade famous Hephaestus make haste and mix earth with water and put in it the voice and strength of human kind, and fashion a sweet, lovely maiden-shape, like to the immortal goddesses in face; and Athena to teach her needle-work and the weaving of the varied web; and golden Aphrodite to shed grace upon her head and cruel longing and cares that wear the limbs. And he charged Hermes the guide, the Slayer of Argus, to put in her a shameless mind and a deceitful nature. . . . and the Herald of the gods put speech in her. And he called this woman Pandora, because all they who dwelt on Olympus gave each a gift, a plague to men who eat bread<sup>5</sup>.

The literary debt owed to Hesiod by Semonides is obvious. The materials of Hephaestus, earth and water, are clearly present in the earth and the sea woman. But whereas Hephaestus in Hesiod's myth provided only the raw materials leaving the other characteristics for the other gods to provide, Semonides describes the earth woman as completely inert, eating being her only activity, while his sea woman is inconstant and changeable as the element she is made of<sup>6</sup>. As Mercier pointed out, Semonides has recast and expanded Hesiod's scheme of the feminine. In his view the pig and the horse women are degradations of Athena's housework, the fox and the dog women are Hermes-like for their knowing and talking, the ass and the weasel women are associated with Aphrodite and sex<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, Semonides' text on the pig woman runs as follows:

In her house everything lies in disorder, smeared with mud, and rolls about the floor; and she herself unwashed, in clothes unlaundered, sits by the dungheap and grows fat<sup>8</sup>.

And about the horse woman he says:

Another was the offspring of the proud mare with a long mane. She pushes servile work and trouble on to others; she would never set her hand to a mill, nor pick up a sieve nor throw the dung out of the house, nor sit over the oven dodging the soot; she makes her husband acquainted with Necessity. She washes the dirt off herself twice, sometimes three times, every day; she rubs herself with scents, and always has her thick hair combed and garlanded with flowers. A woman like her is a fine sight for others, but for the man she belongs to she proves a plague, unless he is some tyrant or king who takes pride in such objects<sup>9</sup>.

In short, these two types both neglect the household tasks women are supposed to take care of, the pig woman neglects herself as well, the horse woman spends all her time - and her husband's money - to make herself beautiful.

The fox and the dog women bear witness of Hermes' gifts, as the former one is:

a woman who knows everything. No bad thing and no better kind of thing is lost on her; for she often calls a good thing bad and a bad thing good. Her attitude is never the same<sup>10</sup>.

while the latter is:

vicious, own daughter of her mother, who wants to hear everything and know everything. She peers everywhere and strays everywhere, always yapping, even if she sees no human being. A man cannot stop her by threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking out her teeth with a stone, nor with honeyed words, nor even if she is sitting with friends, but ceaselessly she keeps up a barking you can do nothing with<sup>11</sup>.

While Hermes' cleverness and eloquence are male virtues in origin, they easily become vices where a woman is concerned.

Laziness, i.e. the neglect of Athena's works, and insatiable appetite for the food she fails to produce, are linked in the ass woman with an

excessive sexual lustfulness, a vice which is even worse in the weasel woman as she is:

mad for the bed of love, but she makes any man she has with her sick. She does great damage to her neighbours by her thieving, and often eats up sacrifices left unburned<sup>12</sup>.

To close the list of mischiefs the ape woman, "the biggest plague of all that Zeus has given to man"<sup>13</sup>, summarizes all female vices, which are quite conventional as we have seen. There is no need to go further into this matter<sup>14</sup>. It is also understandable that the ape, which has always been looked at as a deformation of man and therefore closer to him than any other animal, was chosen to serve these misogynistic purposes<sup>15</sup>.

For the bee woman, the last and the best, the only one that meets her duties as a wife by making her household prosperous and giving her husband children, Semonides may have been inspired by the end of the myth of the creation of woman in Hesiod's **Theogony**. It runs as follows:

And in thatched hives bees feed the drones whose nature is to do mischief - by day and throughout the day until the sun goes down the bees are busy and lay the white combs, while the drones stay at home in the covered skeps and reap the toil of others into their own bellies - even so Zeus who thunders on high made women to be an evil to mortal men, with a nature to do evil<sup>16</sup>.

It is even possible that the idea of the perfect bee woman inspired him to give the mischievous gifts of the gods to Hesiod's first woman the shape of different animals.

But there is more. The creation of human beings out of animals is a motif which existed already in fable literature. Here, even more than in Hesiod's creation myth, Prometheus plays a prominent part.

The aesopian fable **Prometheus and Men** runs as follows:

Prometheus fashioned men and animals at the command of Zeus. When Zeus saw that the dumb animals were much more numerous, he ordered him to destroy some of them and to

transform them into human beings. Prometheus did as was ordered and so it came about that those who were fashioned out of animals have the shape of humans, but the souls of beasts<sup>17</sup>.

In this fable all the elements but one of Semonides' censure on women are present. There is the **post factum** creation of a part of mankind out of animals and there is the fact that the creatures fashioned in this way keep the characteristics of their origin even if they look like human beings. The only element in the story we are missing is woman.

However, in the male centred world of the Greeks, who else could these second-hand humans be than women? Lucian referring to Prometheus' creation of mankind at least understood the myth that way when he makes Hermes say to Prometheus:

then you made human beings, thoroughly knavish creatures, particularly the women<sup>18</sup>.

It goes without saying that the association of women with the animal reign went a long way in Western misogynistic literature. It would take us too long to go further into that subject here<sup>19</sup>. But I should like to tell you a Mõssi tale of Burkina Faso dealing with the same theme of the creation of women out of animals. It is entitled **Le Genre Humain** and was written down by Blaise Cendrars in 1921<sup>20</sup>.

Trois hommes s'étaient suivis pour aller chez Ouendé exposer leur besoins. L'un dit : - Je veux un cheval. L'autre dit : - Je veux des chiens pour chasser dans la brousse. Le troisième dit : - Je veux une femme pour me désaltérer.

Et Ouendé leur donna tout : au premier, un cheval; au second, des chiens; au dernier une femme.

Les trois hommes s'en vont. Mais arrive la pluie et les enferme trois jours dans la brousse. La femme leur fait à manger, à tous les trois. Les hommes disent:- Retournons chez Ouendé. Et ils y vont.

Tous lui demandent alors des femmes. Et Ouendé veut bien changer le cheval en femme et les chiens aussi en femmes.

Les hommes s'en vont. Or la femme issue du cheval est gourmande; les femmes issues des chiens sont méchantes; mais la première femme, celle que Ouendé avait donnée à l'un d'eux est bonne : c'est la mère du genre humain.

When comparing this African folktale with Semonides' fragm. 7 the similarities are striking. Both show women as created by God out of animals and keeping the characteristics of these animals. The characteristics of the horse and the dog are somewhat different in both cases but this is only a matter of details.

However, more important than the similarities is, in my view, the completely different attitude towards women appearing from each of the texts. Whereas for Semonides, as for his master Hesiod, a woman is the greatest ill Zeus has ever made<sup>21</sup>, the Mòssi tale considers a woman the best gift a man can ask from God. Men who ask him other gifts will always be deceived, since a dog or a horse will never be anything else but a dog or a horse. Only the real woman, the one that God in his goodness made first as a gift to man, will take care of his household, give him food and bear him children; she is the mother of our race.

In conclusion, the question arises whether the different spirit in which the same theme was treated might be related to the different cultural backgrounds of the two stories. In other words, could it be that whereas Western tradition is to a larger extent misogynistic, African tradition shows, on the contrary, a very great reverence for women? This question is for the anthropologists to answer<sup>22</sup>.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Greek edition with English translation in **Elegy and Iambus Being the Remains of All the Greek Elegiac and Iambic Poets from Callinus to Crates Excepting the Choliambic Writers with the Anacreontea**, ed. and transl. J.M. Edmonds, 2 vols., The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge Mass. & London 1979), II, pp. 216-225. Commented edition with excellent translation by H. Lloyd Jones, **Females of the Species; Semonides on Women** (London 1975). All translations of Semonides will be quoted after this edition.

- 2 For a short story of negative scholarly opinion see Lloyd Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 22. H. Fränkel, **Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums** (New York 1951), transl. M. Haddas and J. Willis, **Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy** (New York & London 1975), p. 205 reflects this general opinion. L. Schear, "Semonides fr. 7 : Wives and their Husbands", **Echos du Monde Classique** 28 (1984), pp. 39-49 relates this type of poetry to marriage-feasts where women, even the bride herself, were unlikely to be present.
- 3 M. Trédé, "Sémonide 7,1. Sens et emploi de choris ou "Comment l'esprit <ne> vint <pas> aux femmes", in **Ediston Logodeipnon. Logopédies. Mélanges de philologie et de linguistique grecque offerts à Jean Taillardat**, Coll. SELAF, 276 (Paris 1988), pp. 235-245 discusses the various translations of the opening words. Exploring the different meanings of the word choris in Greek literature she concludes that here it should be considered as a preposition, "without". This makes her follow the interpretation of L. Radermacher, **Weinen und Lachen** (Vienna 1947), p. 161 which I am adopting as well.
- 4 G. Martorana, "Nascità della donna e storia umana", **Seia** 1 (1984), pp. 191-194 compared the creation of woman in Greek, Roman and christian mythology and noticed that this is a common feature.
- 5 Hesiod, **Works and Days**, vv. 57-82, in **Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric**, ed. with Engl. transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge Mass. & London 1970), pp. 6-9. A similar account of the creation of woman is to be found in Hesiod, **Theogony**, vv. 561-612, *ibid.*, pp. 120-123.
- 6 Semonides, fr. 7, vv. 21-42. Cf. Hesiod, **Works and Days**, v. 101: "for earth is full of evils and the sea is full".
- 7 Ch.E. Mercier, "Semonides on Hesiod on the Creation of Women", summary in **American Philological Association Abstracts 1988** (1989), p. 68.
- 8 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 2-6. Translation H. Lloyd Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 36.

- 9 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 57-70. Translation H. LLOYD Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 48.
- 10 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 7-11. Translation H. LLOYD Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 38.
- 11 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 12-20. Translation H. LLOYD Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 40.
- 12 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 43-56. Translation H. LLOYD Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 46.
- 13 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 71-82. Translation H. LLOYD Jones, **Females of the Species**, p. 50.
- 14 For an extensive account on conventional female vices in literature see E. Moser-Rath, "Frau", in **Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung**, ed. K. Ranke e.a. (Berlin & New York 1985), V, 1, col. 121-137.
- 15 Cf. R. and S. Schenda, "Affe", in **Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung**, ed. K. Rank e.a. (Berlin & New York 1977), I, col. 137-145.
- 16 Hesiod, **Theogony**, ed. Evelyn-White, vv. 594-602. Cf. P.E. Easterling, "Semonides", in **The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Volume I, Part I, Early Greek Poetry**, ed. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 112-116, esp. p. 115 : "Hesiod too emphasizes the bad side and in fact uses the bee image to bring out the laziness of women : they are the drones for whom the men work all day long". Ironically enough, in reality drones are male, while working bees are female.
- 17 Greek text in **Corpus Fabularum Aesopicarum**, ed. A. Hausrath, 2 vols. (Leipzig 1959), I, p. 50, nr. 228.
- 18 Lucian, **Prometheus, 3** in **Lucian**, ed. with Engl. transl. A.M. Harmon, 8 vols., The Loeb Classical Library (London & Cambridge Mass. 1968), II, pp. 244-245. Cf. Lucian, **Prometheus, 11**, *ibid.*, pp. 254-255.



- 19 See S. Thompson, **Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends**, 6 vols. (Copenhagen 1955-1958). For similar myths of women made out of different animals attested from antiquity as well as from comparatively modern times see H. Lloyd Jones, **Females of the Species**, pp. 20-21 and H. Verbruggen, "De afstamming van de vrouwen" in "Vrouwenstudies en de klassieke oudheid", **Didactica Classica Gandensia** 29-30 (1989-1990), pp. 94-101.
- 20 B. Cendrars, **Anthologie nègre** (Paris 1921), p. 26.
- 21 Semonides fr. 7, vv. 95-96.
- 22 This paper has been read at the **9th International Colloquium: Beast Epic, Fable and Fabliau** of the **International Reynard Society** (Groningen, The Netherlands 22-26 VII 1991).