

Around the middle of the seventh century BC the Greek island of Amorgos, one of the Sporades, produced a poet of note named Semonides. He wrote a kind of poetry the Greeks called *iambos*: short pieces expressing personal likes and dislikes, occasionally serious, but often funny and satirical, sometimes even scurrilous and obscene. *Iamboi* (the plural of *iambos*) were normally written in the same metre, a series of alternating short and long syllables; in English we still call the very similar alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables, such as Shakespeare used for his blank verse, "iambic". Semonides's *iamboi*, like those of his contemporary Archilochos of Paros, show a range of themes, but tend to concentrate on the concerns of everyday life: food, clothes, love, entertainment, bereavement, and so on. In the uproarious and sometimes irreverent atmosphere of these early poems scholars have often seen the ancestor of later Greek comedy. Aristophanes, its greatest representative, included a large helping of satire in his comic feasts, taking aim at prominent public figures of his day; similarly, Archilochos two hundred years earlier pokes vicious fun at foppish generals and deceitful former friends.

Apart from many shorter quotations, two substantial poems by Semonides survive. The first, amounting to 24 lines, is a sober reflection on the unpredictability of life. The second runs on for an astounding 118 lines before breaking off. It is a satire on women, the first representative of a lamentable genre in European literary history. The occasion for which Semonides wrote this composition is not known. Some critics have read it as a serious disquisition about human nature, but others have guessed with greater probability that it was meant to be funny. The most likely ambience for its performance (all early Greek poems were published mainly by reading aloud) was a symposium, a dinner/drinking party that was a very popular form of entertainment in Greek cities. Songs were always part of the program, and the more talented members would compose new ones for the occasion. Many of the surviving poems from the period were the texts of these songs. It is important to note that the guests at symposia were all male; if women were there, they would be *hetairai* - professional entertainers and prostitutes. Semonides's poem,

then, was meant to amuse the male guests by poking fun at their wives, who, being absent, were unable to defend themselves. For it is the function of women as wives that Semonides has very much in mind in his satire.

"The god made different kinds of women at the start," begins the poem. "One he made from the long-haired sow. In her house everything lies about in disarray, befouled with mud, rolling on the floor; she herself, unwashed, in unlaundered clothes, sits in the dung heap growing fat." The poet goes on to catalogue many other animals from which the god made women; each woman is assigned a list of character traits she supposedly shares with her animal congener. There is also a woman made from the sea, and another from the earth. Almost all the women are depicted in very uncomplimentary terms. The misogyny is obvious. Of course, Semonides and his buddies all had a good laugh about it. One can well imagine the drunken guffaws, elbow jabs and knowing winks. Rude suggestions were no doubt made about the real identity of the sow-woman, not to mention the dog-woman, the donkey-woman, or the monkey-woman.

Here are some more excerpts:

"Another he made from the weasel. What a wretched, stinking sort this is. In her there is nothing good or desirable, nothing pleasant or lovable. She knows nothing of the ways of Aphrodite, and makes the man she's with sick. She does a lot of mischief to the neighbours with her thieving, and often gulps down the uncooked bits at sacrifices.

The long-maned, dainty horse gave birth to another. She shirks servile work and pain; nor would she touch a millstone, or hoist a sieve, or chuck the dung from the house, or sit by the stove keeping clear of the soot. She makes her husband a friend of necessity; twice a day (sometimes thrice) she takes a bath and anoints herself with oil, and always sports a towering, well-groomed coiffure, plastered with flowers.

Then there's the monkey-woman. This is definitely the worst disaster Zeus ever bestowed on man. She is hideously ugly. Everybody laughs at her when she goes through town. Her neck's short, her gait is awkward. She's got no behind, she's nothing but leg. Pity the poor sod who has to hug an affliction like her! She knows lots of tricks and wiles just like a monkey.

She doesn't care if she's laughed at. She never does anybody any good, but spends all day thinking of only one thing, how she can do the greatest mischief."

There is only one good woman in the poem. Significantly, her virtues are those which most benefit her husband:

"One he made from a bee. Fortunate the man who has her! Only to her is no blame attached. His estate flourishes and increases under her care, and she grows old in mutual love with her husband, mother of a fine and renowned family. She stands out among women, and a divine grace attends her. She takes no pleasure sitting with the women where they talk of love. Such women are the best and most sensible whom Zeus gives to men."

The only good woman in the catalogue industriously attends her husband's property, takes care of her family, and avoids scandal. One is relieved to find a mention of "mutual love", but disappointed to find that it depends on the wife fitting into her husband's expectations. In Semonides's time, of course, the role of women was all but confined to the domestic sphere. Many would have "internalized" the expectations of society (to use the current jargon), accepted their role as natural, and found happiness within it. Others certainly chafed under their restrictions, but we do not hear their voices in the surviving sources. Both types of women, even if appreciating the stinting praise accorded by Semonides to the bee-woman, might have resented the crueller touches in his caricatures of their sisters. If, that is, they ever heard the poem.

(Complete translations may be found in R. Lattimore, *Greek Lyrics* [Chicago 1960] p. 8, and M.L. West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* [Oxford 1993] p. 17.)