

“We Would Not Love Evil Things”: A Reinterpretation of Semonides

That Semonides’ poetry is deeply intertextual with Hesiod’s is well established in modern scholarship (Carson 1984; Fränkel 1969; Lloyd-Jones 1975), but this intertextuality has often been used to denigrate Semonides as a second-rate imitator (Carson 1984; Morgan 2005). I argue against this interpretation and demonstrate that instead Semonides’ intertextualities with Hesiod reveal him to be a creative poet playfully interacting with both his literary predecessors and his audience. I establish that in West fragment 1 Semonides revises the understanding regarding human ignorance and women’s role in human suffering which Hesiod posits in the *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*. Furthermore, West fragment 7 shows Semonides manipulating his male symposiastic audience in order to redefine their relationship with their wives and rework Hesiod’s narration of female immorality.

In fragment 1, Semonides emphasizes the fundamental ignorance of humankind compared to the gods (1-5), engaging with Hesiod’s repeated use of the epithet “with eternal counsels” for Zeus in the *Theogony* (*aphthita mēdea eidōs*, 545, 550, 561; all translations are sourced from the respective Loeb editions unless otherwise specified). While in the *Theogony* it is Zeus’ ironic ignorance of Prometheus’ trick that leads to evils for mankind, Semonides places the origin of evil firmly in humanity’s fundamentally precarious epistemology. Where Hesiod claims that *elpis* is the sole emotion remaining in Pandora’s Box (*W&D* 96), Semonides lists it first among the particular causes of evils for men (fr. 1, 6); in view of mankind’s insurmountable ontological ignorance, *elpis* can only be the greatest source of evil for mankind. For Semonides, there is no escape from human suffering unless men gain godlike wisdom, in opposition to Hesiod’s viewpoint, which ascribes human evils to divine actions.

This fundamental ignorance lies at the core of fragment 7, where Semonides lists the different types of women and emphasizes how men are deeply unaware of their wives' behavior. This recreates the dynamic of men being mere beasts compared to the gods found in fragment 1; just as Zeus was tricked by Prometheus, so men are deceived by their wives. Semonides is inverting Hesiod, who collapses the sins of all womankind into the figure of Pandora; by exploring the different ways women can be deceitful and immoral, he emphasizes the humor (Konstan 2015) and eroticism (Osborne 2001) of his male symposiastic audience's relationship with women, in opposition to Hesiod's grim outlook.

In his description of these women, Semonides frequently uses the word *kakon* (e.g. fr. 7, 68) which evokes Hesiod's description of Pandora as a *kalon kakon* (*Theogony* 585), and particularly Zeus' claim that he will create a "an evil in which they may all take pleasure in their spirit, embracing their own evil" to punish mankind (*kakon ōi ken apantes terpōntai kata thumon, eon kakon amphagapōntes*, *W&D* 57-8). I argue that this intertext offers a re-interpretation of the inscrutable phrase Semonides uses at the end of fragment 1, that if men obeyed him then "we would not love evils" (*ouk an kakōn erōimen*, fr. 1 23-24; my own translation); by heavily referencing Hesiod's poetry, Semonides includes 'women' among the potential meanings of the word *kakōn*. These intertextualities mean that we must interpret Semonides as a playful and talented poet reworking Hesiodic ideas in complex and multifaceted ways.

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