

Kristeva's *Ménage(rie)*: Bestial Women in Semonides 7

Using Semonides 7 as a case study, this paper explores the impulses behind cataloging bestial women through the Kristevan chora. Kristeva defines the maternal body (the chora) as a space from which disgust arises and the process of abjection occurs (1982). By describing the effects of female-animal hybridity on the marriage bond, Semonides confronts the process of abjection, the movement away from the feminine (natural, semiotic) world into the masculine (linguistic, symbolic), from the husband's point-of-view. Throughout his catalogue, Semonides describes the female body as a receptacle for ten mental types—eight animal, two elemental—to control: the pig woman wallows in her own filth, the dog woman constantly yaps, etc. Only the bee-woman uses her body to gestate offspring; all other bodies are abused and misused for household and nuptial duties by the animal *vóoc* (mind). Abjection, the husband's confrontation with his wife's *vóoc*, threatens the male social dynamic but also creates language, cohesion, and social order. By describing the relationship between human men and bestial women, Semonides suggests that female-animal hybridity produces the impulses and drives necessary for a productive society grounded in domestic and political *ἔρις* (strife).

Like Kristeva, I argue that the presence of women's bodies in Greek literature has little to do with "real" women and speaks mainly to male anxiety; however, unlike Kristeva, I argue that not all bestial women exist separately from the symbolic world. Oliver contends that the abject reflects "bodily drives themselves and [mankind's] frustrated and frustrating attempts to master them through language" (2009, 284). This "mastery" through language operates on both sides in Semonides, in which women represent a space where disgust gives birth to language, i.e., the iambic catalogue.

Semonides does not preclude women from the symbolic world but suggests that women

have their own language connected to male discourse through the erotic. If λόγος determines what is human and, more importantly, what is man (Heath 2005), the ἀφροδισίοι λόγοι (erotic tales) that the bee woman disdains (89–91) is the semiotic language women produce, a language that might form a commensurate catalogue of bestial men with a female narrator. By composing ἀφροδισίοι λόγοι, both sexes attempt to “read” each others’ internal symptoms (King 1998). Like ἔρος (love) in Plato’s *Symposium*, these ἀφροδισίοι λόγοι, both male and female, promote coupling in the context of symposia (Osborne 2001), albeit less sensually in Semonides. Ἔρος and abjection, seemingly opposites, work together: strife at the hearth produces strife in the *agora*.

Female hybridity produces behaviors that seem to threaten but in fact uphold male social order. Whereas in ancient art the hybrid had clearly delineated parts—some animal, some human—that could be isolated and picked apart (Hughes 2010), the animal νόος cannot be extracted from the body. Moreover, while Lacqueur’s “one-sex body” hypothesis works for bodies in Semonides (King 2013), it falls apart in the face of female minds. If language defines humanity, then speech controls hybridity, not the body parts affected. On the “nonhumaness” of Semonides’ women, Payne writes that it must “involve some ongoing re-enchantment of the appetitive bond between the married couple” (2010, 119). This “re-enchantment” involves the marriage of ἔρος with ἔρις. Where Hesiod’s two types of ἔρις are mutually opposed, they work together in Semonides, where erotic anxiety does not lead to divorce or uxoricide but competition and oral composition. Helen, the greatest κακόν (evil) of all (115), produces the Trojan War, both event and epic, and generates the kind of ἔρις that is ultimately positive in Semonides, despite the catalogue’s invective nature.

The impulse towards invective arises out of man’s anxiety towards woman’s innate

hybridity and manifests in the exchange of abusive and erotic poetry. Creature-kinship makes women uneasy, potentially dangerous rivals for men because they threaten male-male relationships; however, Semonides' animal brides couple ἔρις with ἔπος and generate harmony out of horror and abjection. Without ἔρις and the chora, men lack the symbolic tools necessary for social competition. For Semonides, external, political order arises from internal, domestic disorder motivated by iambic discourse.

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