A Semonidian Fragment (7)

Paul McGilvery

Apart from man did God make woman's mind and soul, and from the start. Indeed, one from a bristling sow who covers everything in filth throughout the house. She lies down shamelessly and romps about in muck.

Herself unwashed and in her selfsame unwashed clothes she sits upon the dung and fattens herself up. One, from a wily fox God made a woman's kind. She knows all things, this one, and nothing in its turn escapes her sight at all, of evil or of good.

What's good is bad, she'll say, and often makes the case, but has a mood that changes every hour, it seems. One from a dog, a tramp, a whelp-birthing machine, who wants to hear and see each thing that comes around. Darting her eyes about, she barks at everything whether or not she should see anyone at all.

A man can't quiet her by threatening her aloud, nor, angered, if he'd dash her teeth in with a stone, nor gently if he brings his dulcet tones to bear, nor yet if even in the presence of a guest, and constantly has with this imbroglio to tend.

Olympians have formed from clay another one: She's lame and helpless whom they've given unto men. Ignorant, this wife knows neither saint nor sin. The only skill she knows is how to eat, it seems, and if, perchance, God should create a winter's chill, shivering, she draws her chair up nearer to the fire.

One from the sea, who minds two moods within her breast: one day she's giggling and cheerful as can be; a guest esteems her then, when seeing her at home:

"There's not another more agreeable than her! In all humanity there's not a finer wife!"

But on another day, one dares not look her in the eye, nor happen near, for she is driven mad with ire, unsociable as is a bitch among her pups,
Implacable, she fumes at everyone that day, behaving thus to friends and enemies alike.

Just as the sea frequently stands unmoved and calm for sailors – a great joy – and kindly does no harm in summertime, often it is consumed with rage

And heavy-sounding billows, tossing violently.
She's most like this, the wife whose temper is the sea, although the ocean cuts a different form than she.
One from an ass was made, who's obdurate and grey, she who, by force together with admonishment

Scarcely acquiesces in whatever work needs done, but not too well. Meanwhile she eats both day and night and takes repast in corners, and by hearths as well.
But all the same, when she is plying Venus' trade she gives a welcome to whomever comes her way.

One from a weasel – wretched, woeful kind, she is – for whom there is no air of pulchritude at all nor anything so lovely or desirable.
She's inexperienced in Venus' pillooned bed and gives the chap who's riding seasickness instead.

She steals from all the neighbors, works her many ills, and eats the offal that was meant for sacrifice.
A horse begat another, dainty and well-maned, who shrinks from every chore and turns away from work, who will not paw the millstone lightly, nor yet lift the

sieve, nor yet even throw the shit out from the stall, nor sit before the stove because she's frightened of the soot; and yet compels a man to be her mate.
She bathes away the dirt at least two times a day, or even three, anoints her skin with fragrances, and makes the habit consummate to comb her hair out straight, bedecking it with flowers for their shades.
Indeed, this wife may be a spectacle of grace to others, woe is she, however, to her man.
Unless he were a tyrant, or a sceptered king;

whoever glorifies such vanities as these.
One from an ape, and this, in fact, distinctly was the worst calamity that Zeus apportioned men.
An incongruous countenance this woman sports, ridiculous to all the people in the town:
εἶπ’ αὐχένα βραχεία· κινεῖται μόγης· ἄπυγος, αὐτόκολος. ἄ τάλας ἁνήρ ὅστις κακόν τοιοῦτον ἀγκαλίζεται, δὴν<εα> δὲ πάντα καὶ τρόπους ἐπισταται ὅσπερ πιθήκος· οὐδὲ οἱ γέλως μέλει·

οὐδ’ ἂν τιν’ εὐ ἔρξειν, ἄλλα τοῦτ’ ὅραί καὶ τοῦτο πᾶσαν ἡμέρην θυμεύεται, ὅκος τι κός μέγιστον ἔρξειν κακόν· τὴν δ’ εκ μελὴσῃς· τῆς τις εὐτυχεῖ λαβὼν· κεῖνη γὰρ ὅπη μῶμος οὐ προσταίνει·

θάλλει δ’ ὑπ’ αὐτῆς καπαέξηται βίος, φηλὴ δὲ σὺν φηλ<εο>ντι γηράσκεται πόσει τεκούσα καλῶν κόσμουκλωτόν γένος, κάρποδρηπῆς μὲν ἐν γυναιξι γίνεται πάσης, θείη δ’ ἀμφιδέρδεμεν χάρις.

οὐδ’ ἐν γυναιξιν ἧδεται καθημένη ὅκου λέγουσιν αφροδίσιους λόγους. τοῖς γυναῖκας ἄνθρισιν γιρίζεται Ζεὺς τὰς ἄριστας καὶ πολυφραστάτας· τὰ δ’ ἄλλα φύλα ταῦτα μηχανή Δίος.

ἐστιν τε πάντα καὶ παρ’ ἄνθρισιν μενει· Ζεὺς γὰρ μέγιστον τοῦτ’ ἐποίησαν κακόν, γυναίκας· ἢν τι καὶ δοκ<εω>ντιν ὄψειλεν ἔχοντι, τοῖς μάλιστα γίνεται κακόν· οὐ γὰρ κότ’ ἐφφεραν ἡμέρην διέχρεται

ἀπασαν, ὅστις σὺν γυναικι ἡπέλεται, οὐδ’ ἀγία Λευκόν οἰκίης ἀπώσεται, ἐχθρὸν συνοικητήρα, δυσμεν<εα> θεων. ἄνηρ δ’ ὅταν μάλιστα θυμοθεῖν δοκή κατ’ οίκον, ἢ θ<εω> νομίζεται ἄθροπον χάρι

eὐροῦσα μόμον ἐς μάχην κορύσσεται. ὅκου γυνὴ γὰρ ἔστιν οὐδ’ ἐς οἰκίην ἐξεῖνον μολόντα προφρόνος δεκούτα. ἢτις δ’ τε μάλιστα σωφρονεῖν δοκεῖ, αὐτὴ μέγιστα τυγχάνει λοβωμένην.

her neck is short, her movements arduous, and she's blemless, all skin and bone. Hah! Hapless is the man who never cuddles such a wretched thing as she.

She knows all of the tricks, and all the little turns just like an ape, but never cares when people laugh.

She'd never do a thing if it meant doing good, but calculates and watches all day long to see if in some manner she can do the greatest harm.

One from a bee – whoever marries her is blessed – for onto her alone one cannot fasten blame.

Life flourishes and under her is made to grow.

A joy, with her beloved husband she grows old.

She brings forth children blessed in body and in name. Indeed, she comes to be distinguished among wives.

She's radiant, and grace divine envelops her.

She takes no mirth in sitting down with other wives when they are telling tales of Venus' escapades. That woman unto men was given graciously by Zeus. She is the greatest and the most acclaimed. But all those other kinds (by Zeus' contrivances)

exist, are here withal, and do abide with men. For Zeus did vouchsafe this, the greatest of the ills: the wife. And even if some seem that they could help, those are the ones who cause the husband greatest pains. He never goes through any day, you see, with cheer

entirely, he who has come upon a wife, nor swiftly will he drive out Hunger from his house (a spiteful tenant, and an ill-will from the gods).

Whenever fellows seem the most glad-hearted with their homes, by God's esteem or by the grace of man, she finds a blemish and equips herself for war.

Wherever there's a woman, she may not be keen to take a guest into the house so zealously.

In this way, mark you well, that she who seems to be the wisest is in fact the greatest peccancy,
although her man is all agape, and neighbors praise her, looking on, they are mistaken all, of course. And her whom one might laud (when speaking of his wife) the other man he's talking to will castigate, but neither will believe their lot's identical.

For Zeus gave them to us, the greatest ill of all, and fettered us in bonds – an adamantine spell – since Hades first appropriated all those men who fought the war for Helen's sake in Ilium.

Translator’s note: The poet Semonides flourished during either the 7th or 8th century B.C. He composed iambic and elegiac poetry, as well as invective strains in the style of Hipponax and Archilochus, who are believed to have been his near contemporaries. This is his longest surviving fragment, and outlines a satirical --if not mysogynist -- view of women in Archaic Greece.