

Sample Paper I: GSWS and Classics

[EXCERPT]

Constructions of Gender in Classical Athens

One of the most significant issues in reading Classical Greek texts is in the fact that so little diversity is represented through the authors and story tellers¹. That is to say, although there are many different races and genders and classes of people present in the writings we have looked at, very few authentic voices are allowed to actually show through. Women's characters are present in the texts, but their voices have men's ideas about women inscribed upon them and therefore are not true representations of the ideas, beliefs, and feelings of women at the time. Although authentic female voices aren't heard, male writing of female characters and figures does seem to provide some insight into how men viewed and related to women. A broad range of male writings of the time seemed indicative of a pervasive fear and hatred of women, and sought to subjugate women through reductive tropes and caricaturistic representations².

One of the ways we see these inscriptions of negative male ideas about women present in female characters in the way female characters are written as the “other.” In just about every context, women are portrayed as animalistic, insane, or childlike, but perhaps no other text degrades women with the same degree of misogyny as Semonides in his *Essay on Women*³. The purpose of this particular piece, as one might imagine, is to outline the various types of women that exist, what kind of wives they make, and why men should avoid them. He categorizes them as a range of different animals, including a sow, a weasel, a monkey, a donkey, and, not surprisingly, a bitch. The worst type of woman, though, according to Semonides, is the monkey. Of this kind of women, he writes:

One was a monkey; and this was the very worst,
most exquisite disaster Zeus has wished on men.

¹ Similar to papers in the English/Literature discipline, opening up with a somewhat broad statement pertaining to the argument that will be addressed in the paper can be a helpful way to get started. Avoid clichés like “since the dawn of time humans have been doing [blank]”, but do think of the introduction as a kind of funnel where you are trying to lead the reader to your eventual focus, probably in some sort of thesis at the end of the introductory paragraph.

² Thesis/focus statement. Mine happens to be residing in the traditional spot of last sentence of first paragraph, but this doesn't necessarily need to be the case. Somewhere within the introduction is usually preferred and is the most natural place. Mine also happens to be just one sentence, but this also isn't necessarily required (contrary to what you probably learned in high school...). Keep it concise, but don't radically limit your ideas because of a perceived spacial limitation.

³ One really important part of writing in most disciplines, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies included, is the ability to integrate sources seamlessly into the body of text you are constructing. It is usually helpful to do so in the way I did it in this paragraph, by introducing the author/title/source, discussing it briefly and it's relevance, quoting the actual source properly, and then discussing the quoted passage in more detail.

Hers is the ugliest face of all. When such a woman
walks through the village, everybody turns to laugh.
Her neck's so short she can scarcely turn her head.
Slab-sided, skinny-legged. Oh, unhappy man
who has to take such a disaster in his arms!
Yet she has understanding of all tricks and turns,
just like a monkey. If they laugh, she doesn't mind.
Don't expect any good work done by her. She thinks
of only one thing, plans for one thing, all day long:
how she can do somebody else the biggest harm. (Sem. Ch. 1)⁴

This passage isn't in any way subtle, and it reveals more than a generally dismissive attitude of women, but it is useful insofar as it names tropes that are present in other more subtle representations of women. As a fairly regular rule, we see male writers degrading women for being “tricksters,” and trying to cause problems for their husbands, for being excessively obsessed with sex, and for being lazy and disagreeable housewives. This piece goes to extremes, though, in the way he calls this kind of woman a “disaster” a man becomes stuck with. It is problematic to be discussing women in such rigid categories to begin with, but the specific language in this piece goes above and beyond everyday sexism; it is utterly dehumanizing. There isn't really any argument to be made for this essay by Semonides, as it is so straightforwardly violent and degrading, but the various representations of women give us a solid base for dehumanizing tropes strewn more subtly through other pieces of writing and how to contextualize them. Specifically, they give us a way to understand the degree to which there was no “right” way to be a woman in Athens. Beautiful, ugly, fat, thin, sexual, non-sexual—all of these were coded as bad in one way or another in the essay, and the contradictions therein betray the fact that there is no logical basis for any of the points made or analogies drawn, and problematize nearly all representations of women.

[EXCERPT] What these negative tropes and contradictions seem to illustrate is the way in which a group of people (in this case, men) is able to manipulate reality to enforce an already-existing collection of beliefs and desires about women⁵. That is to say, much like modern-day conceptions about

⁴ In MLA citation, which is what most professors will ask for in GSWS, there are specific citation guidelines depending on the length of the selection. The general rule of thumb is to indent and single space excerpted passages longer than 3-5 lines. Quotation marks around the text are not required, with the author and page number in parenthesis at the end. Because this Gender Studies paper was written for a Classics class, and the source I used was an Ancient Greek text, I used a citation method specifically requested by my professor.

⁵ GSWS writing is most often argument-based. That is to say, assignments don't ask you to simply report on information, but to actually take a position and argue a particular viewpoint. Your thesis is a place to establish an argument, and this argument should be carried through the entire paper. Each new point I make— including this one about how contradictions in negative tropes of women illustrate the degree to which these tropes are in fact constructed, rather than essential—is another argument crafted to reinforce my overarching thesis. I'm not just reporting on my sources, I'm making original

gender (and even sex, although that's a separate issue), the vast majority of existing beliefs are not actually grounded in reality or essential truth, but are phenomenons that are observable because of social conditions. Unfortunately, this is an easily enforced loop because these observed traits of inferiority are then used to continually enforce the status quo. This can be seen in a Classical Greek context through the ways in which women are denied human rights and political privileges. According to Blundell in her chapter "Women in Athenian Law and Society," not only were women "legally incapable of arranging their own marriages" (Blundell, 114)⁶ but there exists "scarcely any evidence to show that a woman was allowed any say in the matter." Furthermore, women had "no independent existence." (114). Because they were only permitted in the realm of the oikos, and the oikos was seen as the property of the man, the women, by way of logic, was also seen solely as the property of her male guardian (114). These laws were not created because women were biologically or socially inferior, but rather the opposite: women were allowed to be oppressed to the degree they were because of rules, laws, and truths created by the men in power. Another interesting example of this brought up in Blundell's chapter is the curious fact of girls being married off so young. In relation to other social and cultural practices, this doesn't make too much sense, since Athenians didn't tend to have huge families. As a counter suggestion, Blundell offers the possibility that having a much younger wife and a relatively older husband "would have helped foster the notion of intellectual inferiority of the female, and would have reinforced patriarchal attitudes towards women."(120). There is nothing accidental or coincidental about this male desire for power and subsequent degradation of women. This is a perfect example of someone or a group of someones intentionally constructing a social practice that actively reinforces a norm that the dominant group benefits from. This is a fairly arbitrary custom to normalize, since Athenians didn't actively desire or produce huge families, but through looking at who might benefit from it, or any other custom, we can get a clearer look at the real motives behind its development.

arguments about them.

⁶ In-text citations of passages less than 3-5 lines are fairly simple to cite in MLA format. Put the passage in quotes, and then put the author's name and the page number (separated by a comma) in parenthesis following the cited passages. If this citation is coming at the end of a sentence, place the period after the parenthesis containing the author's name and page number. Using this kind of brief in-text citation is important both when citing directly and also when paraphrasing closely enough that credit needs to be given to the author.