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PHIL 119H.01: Western Philosophical Perspectives on Women

Joanne Charbonneau

University of Montana - Missoula

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PHIL 119/WS119/LS 119: Western Philosophical Perspectives on Women

Professor Joanne Charbonneau
LA 146A, x4894
Office hours: Tu: 11-12 and 2-3pm and gladly by appointment
Email: JC167543e@mail1.umt.edu

In our class discussions, we will begin with our shared understanding of what is being said, and we will then try to move on to the why. What is behind the attitude expressed and the context (philosophical and intellectual)? What are the underlying assumptions? What is left out—observation, empirical data, scientific method, medical understanding, etc. How is the perspective you have just read tied to historical, social, political, cultural realities? How have they shaped them?

Required Texts:
1) Nancy Tuana, Woman and the History of Philosophy (NT)
2) Mary Briody Mahowald, Philosophy of Woman: An Anthology of Classic and Current Concepts (MBM)
3) carol meyers from Discovering Eve Lilith
   Aristotle: De Generatione...
   Women in Antiquity course: Semonides and Hesiod
   Eve and Pandora Contrasted
   Ovid and Juvenal
   Plato and After—Jeff Mason
   Prudence Allen
   Hypatia
   Hildegard of Bingen
   Troublesome Helpmate
   Nature of Women
   Eros and Power
   Women Philosophers of 17th C
   Woman Paradox in Rousseau
   Hegel
   Kant and Ethics of Care
   Feminist Criticisms of Canon as Misogynistic
   Karen Horney
   Luce Irigaray

Basic Class Requirements or Expectations:
In this class, as in many others, your attendance is essential to the give-and-take, the exchange and challenge of ideas at the heart of a true education. This exchange is particularly important in this course that asks that you engage with the ideas of the text, that you talk with others about your responses in order to sharpen your own ideas and clarify your positions on these important questions about the nature and essence of woman that have plagued male writers and thinkers for
thousands of years and set the tone for social and cultural inequalities that are embedded in our
Western world. You will hear views you disagree with; some you may find repugnant,
offensive, or threatening. I expect civility and a level of discourse that allows all opinions to be
discussed as fairly as possible. To attend class, then, is to hear issues raised, to hear other voices
responding to these ideas, and to voice your own response to them. All of our texts this semester
invite us into a serious conversation, a conversation that matters, a debate that is on-going about
the nature of women. Our hearing of other voices is especially important because many women’s
voices have been silenced for too long. We need to put the past and present together with new
insights, with new form and new substances in order to overcome a misogynistic tradition that
has the weight of many millenia behind it. To miss class, then, is to miss out on a memory—no
matter how small—to miss a link that connects each of us. Perhaps these introductory remarks
will help you understand why it is so important to come to class prepared to talk and to share
your insights and questions with others. I do realize that we are all human so that an alarm clock
might malfunction, you might have a flat tire, or not feel well—so you are allowed a few of these
bad moments with no penalty. HOWEVER,

3-4 absences lower your final grade by ½ grade point;
5-6 absences lower your final grade by a full grade point;
7-8 absences lower your final grade by 1-1/2 grade points;
9 or more absences means automatic failure. You have missed too much to say
that you have “taken” or passed the course. If there is a family emergency or you are struck by a
horrible illness or accident, the attendance policy will be more flexible. I need to know, however,
if there is some problem that prevents you from attending class. Please call me, email, or ask a
friend to notify me about your problem. Do not wait a week or two and never just disappear.

**No late papers or assignments are accepted. No make-up tests.**

**GRADING CRITERIA:**

75% of your final grade: **Writings:** Summarize 3-4 of the most significant points of the
upcoming reading assignments under each new heading in the syllabus, explore the implications
of the ideas and the rationale for them, as well as your intellectual response to the reading—to be
typed and turned in before we discuss the materials, usually every **Tuesday’s** class meeting. This
should be approximately 2-3 typed pages (in which 1 page=250 words). Your first one will be
due on Feb 1st. Sometimes there will be other specific assignments due, but you will be told in
advance (noted on the syllabus or hand-outs or announced in class). Keep all these assignments.
This portfolio will be turned in at the end of semester in which you bracket your above writing
assignments with a fully developed introduction, pertinent transitions in which you see a change
in the direction of the philosophical discussion, and a conclusion in which you evaluate the
challenges of the tradition and perhaps offer alternatives from other philosophical traditions.

25%: **Tests (and quizzes if necessary)**
Your final grade may be raised ½ grade point by your thoughtful and responsible and reasoned
discussion of issues in class. If you remain totally silent for the whole semester, it is possible that
your final grade may be lowered by ½ grade point (especially if you do not discuss your shyness
or problems of speaking up with me privately at the beginning of the semester). In other words I
expect active engagement!
Jan 25: **Introduction:** In dealing with human nature, philosophers often have looked at what they perceive to be essential characteristics in pinpointing what it is to be human. In framing the question about the essence of humanity, philosophers have looked at the make-up of the human body (originally in terms of the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth), whether the mortal human body is all there is or whether there is an immortal soul; the ways the sexes are similar or different, the respective roles in generation or reproduction, whether males and females have the same nature and ultimately what is the nature of human virtue and wisdom. When juxtaposing males and females in terms of whether they relate to wisdom in the same or different ways, whether they have the same or different virtues and whether their sex matters or not, philosophers in the Western world have usually concluded that sex does matter and the male often is seen as the norm and superior and thus women as deficient and inferior. In terms of whether males and females are the same or different and equal or unequal, there are really only four options:

Males and females are the same and equal (theory of sex unity). Theory of sex neutrality, an offshoot of sex unity, says the differences between the sexes can be ignored and do not affect the essence of what it is to be human. In human-ness, males and females are the same. [If they are the same, they cannot be unequal]

Males and females are different yet equal. (theory of sex complementarity)

Males and females are different and unequal and males are superior. (theory of sex polarity).

Males and females are different and unequal and females are superior (theory of reverse sex polarity)

In what ways are males and females different?

**READING ASSIGNMENTS**
(open to some revision as we go along)

**Eve as Every Woman in the Ancient Hebrew Traditions**

Jan 27: Read MBM: Introduction, 1-4 and Genesis account 32-37

Feb 1: Meyers *Discovering Eve* on eres

Feb 3: Lilith: eres

Feb 8:

Hesiod (750 BCE): woman as deceitful plague of man, responsible for bringing evil into the world. Readings on eres: Women in Antiquity course: Semonides and Hesiod

Feb 10: MBM, pp 22-31 and Tuana, 23-31

Aristotle: Greek physiology with female principle as body and matter and passive and male principle as soul or mind and active principle. Woman as defective male.

Eres: Aristotle
Feb 15 and 17:
Hypatia (on eres) and Plato
Tuana, 13-23 and MBM,5-22; Prudence Allen, Chapter One (eres); Plato and After on eres

Feb 22 and 24: Satiric tradition: Ovid (43 BCE-18 CE) and Juvenal (2nd century CE). Ovid is vastly important since medieval authors loved his works and from the 12th c. onward, his poetry was well known and quoted. His epigrams and catalogues of illustrative examples concerning women are easily remembered and easily trotted out to support misogynistic views: “A girl’s word is lighter than leaves in autumn”; “A wife’s dowry is wrangling”; “Her chastity consists in not being asked.” Women (as well as men) are associated with deceit and two-timing in Ovid; however his ironic mode of writing makes generalities about his misogyny dangerous. Nonetheless, later writers pick up on the passages which support their opinion and selectively appropriate Ovid for their own ends. Women’s wild sexual urges (furiosa) in contrast to men’s more law-abiding libido which result in lurid sex-motivated crimes (the catalogues is ancient rhetorical device favored in antifeminist writings).
Readings: eres Ovid and Juvenal

March 1: TEST

Christian and Medieval Adaptations of Earlier Traditions:
Theology and stories of the Fall and Eve as temptress become intertwined with ideas of uncleanness of the female body and other gynecological issues so that woman’s association with inferior matter and body seems natural.

March 3, 8, 10:
1) St. Paul, New Testament, MBM 41-44
2) Ambrose (eres)
3) St. Augustine, MBM 44-51
4) St. Thomas Aquinas in MBM, 52-62
4) Catholic Church’s mandate for a celibate priesthood, bidding clerics to “shun the two-legged she beast” Troublesome Helpmate on eres
5) Nature of Women: eres
6) Hilda Hein, “Woman: A Philosophical Analysis,” eres
7) Hildegard of Bingen: eres

Some 17th C women philosophers
Opposition of Reason and Emotion in Descartes and Rousseau (1712-78)

March 15 and 17:
17th century women philosophers (eres)
MBM, on Rousseau, 87-100 plus eres: Women Paradox in Rousseau
Tuana, 34-42 on Descartes and 43-53 on Rousseau

SPRING BREAK
Vindication of the Rights of Woman: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and Issues of Morality: Kant (1724-1804) and Hume (1711-76)

March 29, 31:
Tuana, 57-82
MBM, On Kant, 101-112 plus eres Kant and Ethics of Care
MBM, on Wollstonecraft, 112-128
MBM, on Hume, 73-87

Privatized Woman: Locke (1632-1704) and Hegel (1770-1831)

April 5 and 7:
Tuana, 86-109
MBM, on Locke 67-73; on Hegel, 128-134 plus eres Hegel

Utilitarianism and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Harriet Taylor Mill

April 12:
MBM, 151-185

Existentialism and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86)

April 14:
MBM, 201-221, from Second Sex

Freud, Jung, Karen Horney, and Psychoanalytical Theories:

April 19:
MBM, Freud, 224-42
MBM, Carl Jung, 242-45
MBM, Karen Horney, 245-56 and eres Karen Horney

April 21:
MBM, Joyce Trebilcot, “Sex Roles: the Argument from Nature,” 349-56
MBM, Christine Pierce, Natural Law Language and Women, 356-68
MBM, Elizabeth Spelman, “Woman: The One and the Many, 369-97

Feminist Challenges

April 26: Tuana 113-121 and Luce Irigaray eres

April 28: TEST #2

May 3: “Feminist Criticisms of Canon as Misogynistic” eres

May 5: Final discussions
Etymology of misogyny: Greek “miso” meaning hatred and “gyno” meaning woman

Greek origin of misogynistic view

- Women were viewed as inferior to men in both mind and body. Greek biology viewed women as innately inferior beings whose functions were childbearing and housekeeping. Knowledge of embryology was limited with the result that it was believed that the male role in reproduction was more active and more important than the female. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle stated that “The creation of a female was always a mistake, therefore, resulting from an imperfect act of generation.” Therefore, females were considered aberrational males and monsters of nature.

- The concept of female psychology is congruent with the biological. Because women were physically inferior, they were also psychologically weak; that is because they were softer and more docile than men, they were despondent, querulous, and deceitful. Lacking control of their passions, women were thought to crave sexual fulfillment. Female passions were created by the *hystera* (womb); thus women were lustful, deceitful, loquacious, irrational, and in extreme cases hysterical. Due to the absence of rationality and emotional control, women should be ruled by men in both the household and the state.

- The negative portrayal of women in Greek literature illustrates the culture’s misogynistic view: Dejanita caused Hercules’ suicide by giving him a poisoned shirt, Clytemnestra slew her husband Agamemnon, Medea murders her own children to get back at Jason, and Livia murdered her husband on behalf of her lover Sejanus, to mention just a few examples.

- Plato somewhat ameliorated Greek misogyny when in the *Republic* he posited that men and women might possess the same virtues. In the *Republic* he created an ideal state in which class, wealth, and gender distinctions are nonexistent. Since there were no households and ownership of property, there was no need to subordinate women. While Plato did entertain the possibility of female virtue, he limited this view when the recognition of female equality was precluded by the absence of property and households; the corollary was that such equality was impossible in reality.

Roman origin of misogynistic view

- The Roman contribution to misogyny is based primarily in law. Roman statutes stipulated that only property-owning adult males should administer households and the affairs of state. *Corpus of Civil Law* became the basis of the European legal system. Females were never emancipated, which meant that they never had the right to legal autonomy or to own land. Women could not sue for divorce, and male heirs inherited their fathers’ property. Because women were excluded from ownership of property, they could not participate in civil society. During the late Republic and Imperial periods the status of women improved slightly although they were never allowed to participate in public life. These modifications included the right to inherit and keep property inherited from their father, the right to bequeath property to children, and the right to divorce.
Christian origin of misogynistic view

- The primary biblical source of misogyny was the account of creation in Genesis in which Eve caused the downfall of Adam and all of mankind by not only eating the forbidden fruit herself but also by tempting Adam to do likewise. The creation story in Genesis was interpreted as portraying women as inferior to men because Eve was created from Adam’s rib. Other Old Testament stories such as Samson and Delilah were also cited as evidence of women’s wickedness. The New Testament relegated women to an inferior role. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 11:3: “the head of a woman is her husband.” I Timothy 2:9-15 cautioned women against wearing jewels, expensive clothes, or elaborate hairdos but also indicated that through childbirth women were saved from their sinful ways. The later Epistles portrayed women as the weaker sex and stressed the subordination of wives to their husbands.

Medieval origin of misogynistic view

- In an attempt to exalt chastity, some overly zealous theologians, most notably, St. Jerome, portrayed women as innately lecherous and shrewish. Adoration of the Virgin Mary promoted virginity as the ideal state for women. Virtuous women were good housekeepers, loyal wives, saints and martyrs.

- The medieval church still subscribed to the misogynistic biblical portrayal of women.

- Secular treatises reinforced the biblical misogynistic view of women. Particularly popular were Walter Map’s *The Letter of Valerius Concerning Not Marrying* and Theophrastus’ *Book Concerning Marriage*. Later, witch-hunting manuals promoted the negative image of women since the witches, who were primarily women, possessed the supposed vices of most women but in an even more exaggerated and dangerous degree.

- The general rule was that males received inheritance, and a husband managed his wife’s dowry (although there are many instances in different countries at different times where this was not always the case).