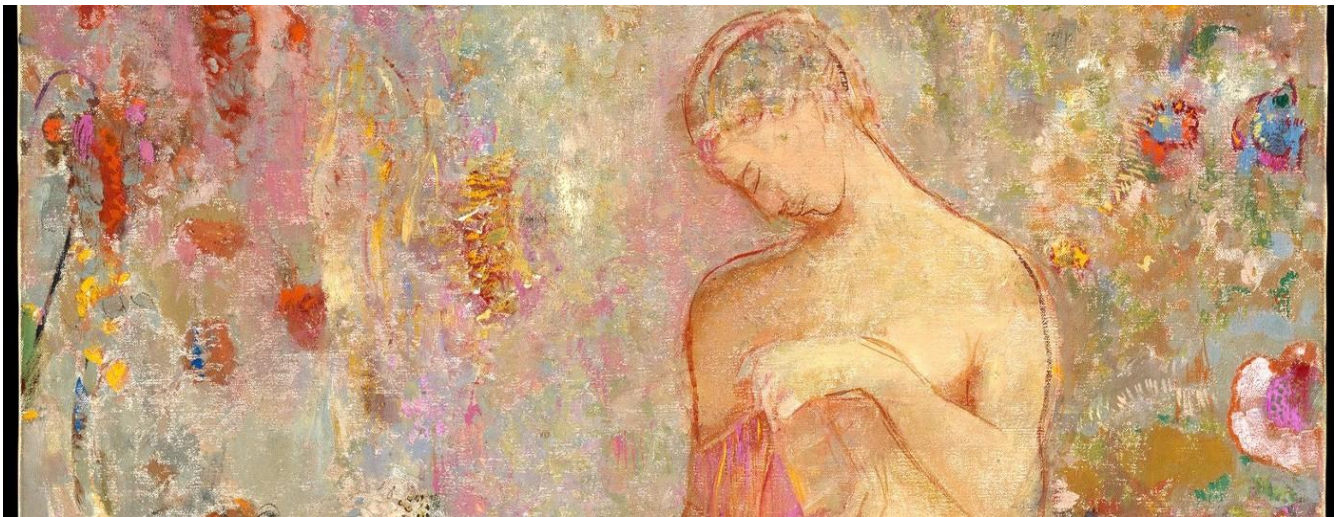


The Bad Wives

Misogyny's Age-Old Roots in the Home

Stephanie McCarter



Odilon Redon, "[Pandora](#)" (c. 1914)

Two days involving a wife are sweetest:

The day someone marries her and the day he carries her out dead.

—Hipponax (7th c. BCE)

Domestic violence re-entered the national conversation earlier this year with the scandal of Rob Porter, the (now former) White House

staff secretary [accused](#) of [physical assault](#) by [two ex-wives](#). The recent school shootings perpetrated by [Nikolas Cruz](#) and [Austin Mills](#) also bear this imprint. The stakes for women cannot be overstated: [studies estimate](#) that [most mass shootings](#) in America are [related to domestic violence](#), and shooters frequently have a [past history of abuse against women](#). Between 2001 and 2012 male partners killed [more American women](#) than US troops died in war.

Misogyny has deadly consequences.

The etymology of “misogyny” is “hatred of women.” But the Greek word *gynê* means, more specifically, “wife.” The household, perhaps even more than the state, remains a bastion of patriarchy. The “bad wife” is one that fails to cede authority to her husband, usurping or intruding upon spheres that traditionally fall under his control — money, sex, business, speech. In her recent book [Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny](#), philosopher Kate Manne reveals how misogyny is connected to patriarchy. [It is a practice](#) that “polices, enforces, and keeps in place” masculine authority and [is triggered](#) “when women break ranks or roles and disrupt the patriarchal order: they tend to be perceived as uppity, unruly, out of line, or insubordinate.” Patriarchy thus relies on women remaining in prescribed roles such as “loving mothers, good wives, cool girlfriends, loyal secretaries.” Women who fail to conform (or are perceived as not doing so) face significant and often violent backlash.

The Greeks provide us not only with the word “misogyny” but also with some of the earliest and starkest examples of invective attack against wives. Manne’s ideas [map well](#) onto these texts, and by doing so they show how much we retain from ancient patriarchal modes of thought, particularly when it comes to power imbalances within marriage (and my focus here admittedly is on heterosexual marriage). As Mary Beard [has illuminated](#), the links between contemporary and

Greco-Roman misogyny are anything but discontinuous. The ancient conception of the “bad wife” helps us see how our own patriarchal system still employs this identity as a “shock-collar,” to use Manne’s terminology, to keep women in line.

The Greek poet Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) closely aligns misogyny against wives and patriarchy in the home. Pandora, for whom Hesiod is our earliest and most important source, is generally known as the first mortal female (*gynê*) but she is more accurately, as Jenny Strauss Clay [has shown](#), the first *wife*. This deeply misogynistic myth lays out the disasters that ensue when a man acquires a “bad wife” who neglects the support roles that uphold her husband’s authority within both the house and the community. In other words, the story constructs an origin for wives that demands they be subject to patriarchal control.

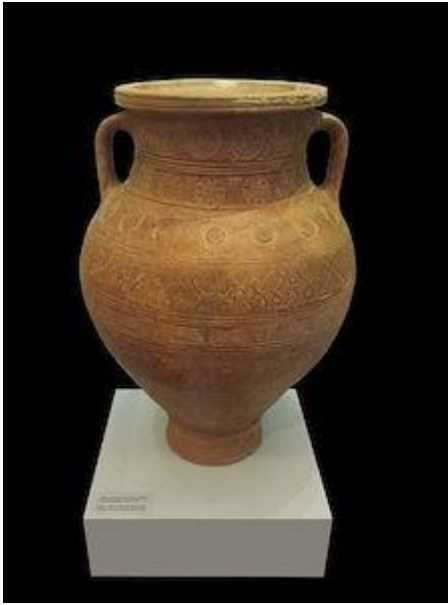
The hallmark of a “bad wife” is to shirk the distinctly feminine task allotted to her: the skillful management of the household. In the *Theogony*, the gods manufacture Pandora for the specific purpose of degrading what her husband has accrued — she is retaliation for mankind’s acquisition of fire, a “[lovely evil to pay for the good](#).” She spends her days consuming and wasting her husband’s goods, an economic burden that feeds her belly with his toil.

Even Pandora’s most famous act concerns not so much her role as the first woman as her role as the first wife. She [opens the lid of a box](#) from which fly out human evils such as disease and hardship — a story often taken as evidence for her curiosity or disobedience.

Yet [in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*](#) there is no box, but a jar, [a Greek *pithos*](#) — and Pandora is never instructed not to remove its lid:

*But the woman took the great lid of the jar in her hands
and scattered [evils], and contrived grief and trouble for humans.*

*Only Hope stayed inside there, in its unbreakable home,
under the lip of the jar — for she threw back the lid
before Hope flew out the door; so willed great cloud-gathering Zeus.*



[Archaic pithos](#) (7th c. BCE), Heraklion Archaeological Museum

Froma Zeitlin has made [the convincing suggestion](#) that the jar represents Pandora's womb, with fallopian tubes that resemble the handles of a *pithos* and an entrance called a *cheilos*, "lip," the same word Hesiod uses for the jar's lid. Without the "hope" contained within her womb, the husband's line would die away — Pandora is an evil, but a necessary one. Yet even this hope remains fluttering within the jar, its fulfillment no guarantee. While the "good" wife provides her husband an heir to sustain his household, the "bad" wife is but a barren curse. Hesiod [later proclaims](#) that nothing is better than a good wife, and nothing more horrible than a bad one.

Pandora introduces the need for patriarchy within the home since, left unchecked, the wife would cause the dissolution of her husband's estate. This runs parallel to one of Hesiod's chief concerns, especially

in the *Theogony*: how the ascent of Zeus transpires only when he curbs powerful female goddesses such as Gaia (his grandmother), Rhea (his mother), and Hera (one of his wives). His crowning moment comes when he consumes his pregnant wife, Metis, rendering her powerless to threaten his new rule. Zeus thereupon gives birth to Athena from his own head — a virginal daughter fully obedient to her father. Zeus's patriarchy stretches across the heavens and has as its underpinning the patriarchy within his own home. The intrinsic disobedience of wives threatens to subvert this cosmic masculine order.

Semonides (mid-7th c. BCE) [composed an invective poem against wives](#), cataloging how their different types were formed from various animals or natural elements: pig, fox, dog, earth, ocean, ass, weasel, horse, ape, and bee. Like the story of Pandora, this poem outlines women's origins as a rationale for patriarchy within the home, and misogynistic aggression becomes a way to assert masculine control. [The poem](#) also introduces a number of abusive stereotypes that we still continue to exert against wives. It was most likely performed, moreover, at a symposium, a drinking party of citizen men from which respectable wives were excluded (though not female prostitutes, who faced different but connected forms of misogyny). It therefore served to cement and reinforce male identity.

Several reproaches recur throughout the poem: wives are nosy, moody, hypersexual, untrustworthy, cunning, and nagging. Above all, they are an economic and social liability. Physical violence is a perfectly acceptable though often ineffective strategy for reasserting gender hierarchy when dealing with a recalcitrant wife, such as the dog-type:

A man can't stop her barking; not with threats,

*not (when he's had enough) by knocking out
her teeth with a stone, and not with sweet talk either;
even among guests, she'll sit and yap;
the onslaught of her voice cannot be stopped.*

Or the ass-type:

*Another type is from a drab, gray ass;
she's used to getting smacked, and won't give in
until you threaten her and really force her.
She'll do her work all right, and won't complain;
but then she eats all day, all night — she eats
everything in sight, in every room.
And when it comes to sex, she's just as bad;
she welcomes any man that passes by.*

In seeking agency over speech, money, and sexuality, the dog- and ass-type undermine the stability of the male-dominated household. The wives' unchecked intrusion spreads throughout the whole of the house as they talk — or rather, bark — even among male guests (*xenoi*) and consume the goods in every room. There is no functioning patriarchy in this home.

Semonides pays particular attention to female bodies, but whereas Pandora the bride is a “beautiful evil,” wives here become grotesque. The pig-wife, “unbathed, in unwashed clothes, reposes on the shit-pile, growing fat,” while the ape-woman consists of nothing but disassembled, misshapen parts uninviting to the male gaze:

Her face is hideous.

*This woman is a total laughingstock
when she walks through the town. She has no neck,
no butt — she's all legs. You should see the way
she moves around. I pity the poor man
who holds this horrid woman in his arms.*

That wives “let themselves go” remains an [entrenched misogynistic axiom](#). The “good” wife tends to her physical appearance not to her own ends but to enhance her husband’s social distinction. It is ultimately the husband that is the butt of the denigrating laughter the “bad” wife elicits as she walks through the city’s public spaces.

The lone exception to the physical ugliness of “bad” wives in Semonides is the aristocratic mare-wife, who, like Pandora, is beautiful. Yet she refuses to perform domestic tasks, perfumes herself with oil, and bathes daily. While “such a wife is beautiful to look at for others, for her keeper she’s a pain.” The beauty that could be a social asset to her husband becomes instead a source of financial drain.

Even as Semonides’ animal wives intrude upon the male spheres of speech, hospitality, and the urban landscape, they deny their husbands traditionally “feminine” supports such as children and a comfortable domestic haven. The feeling that a woman ought to “give feminine-coded goods to [a man], and refrain from taking masculine-coded goods away from him” is, [according to Manne](#), at the heart of misogynistic backlash.

The sole “good” wife in Semonides derives from a bee, and she offers an array of supportive activities to her husband. The house thrives under her care, she is graceful and lovely, and she never gossips. Perhaps most significantly, she is a mother, the only type that in

Hesiodic terms brings to fruition the “hope” of her womb. Yet such a wife is nearly impossible to obtain. When a man thinks he has one, “the neighbors laugh at how he’s been deceived.” The line that encapsulates the poem’s moral is “Zeus made this the greatest pain of all: Wife” (adapted from Svarlien).

Ancient Greek attitudes toward women were complex and varied, and Semonides was writing in a poetic tradition — iambic — that routinely included harsh attack. His views surely do not represent the attitudes of every ancient Greek man, yet they do reflect a larger system concerned with policing women’s position on the gender hierarchy and keeping them tethered to the socially acceptable role of “good wife.”

The modes of attack have changed too little over the ensuing millennia. “Bad” wives remain stereotyped as busybodies, nags, gold diggers, trophy wives, and harpies. [Article](#) after [article](#) in women’s magazines still exhort wives to avoid such behaviors if they want a happy marriage, while men are [offered](#) one [listicle](#) after [another](#) [enumerating](#) “types” of women best avoided. Our favorite derogatory designation for a woman, “bitch,” still aligns her with the animal world — as do terms like “henpeck,” “fox,” “queen bee,” “cold fish,” “cougar,” “vixen,” “shrew,” “chick,” “cow,” and “sex kitten.” Such dehumanization imposes a hierarchy whereby women are rendered less than men. The culturally sanctioned idea of the “bad wife” provides easy provocation for the violent misogynist who feels his masculine authority has been jeopardized.

The hostility toward wives espoused by these ancient texts has not gone away — it is echoed again and again in our popular culture. [Our most celebrated literature](#) is [full of](#) stereotypical [tropes against women, including wives](#). Television, even that celebrated as “prestige”

TV, repeatedly offers [problematic views of wives](#) that [draw out misogynistic responses from audiences](#).

But in this moment, perhaps the most salient parallels to this ancient tradition have issued from the mouth of the president, who has a [long and well-documented history](#) of dangerously validating these age-old tropes. To Trump, as in Hesiod and Semonides, wives threaten patriarchal authority when they impinge upon male-dominated spheres, offer nagging criticism instead of validation, or claim for themselves the goods that belong to their husbands. And he responds with invective barrages meant to put them back in place. For example, in [The Art of the Comeback](#) (1997), Trump explains the failure of his marriage to Ivana with these words:

My big mistake with Ivana was taking her out of the role of wife and allowing her to run one of my casinos in Atlantic City, then the Plaza Hotel. The problem was, work was all she wanted to talk about. When I got home at night, rather than talking about the softer subjects of life, she wanted to tell me how well the Plaza was doing, or what a great day the casino had ... I will never again give a wife responsibility within my business. Ivana worked very hard, and I appreciated the effort, but I soon began to realize that I was married to a businessperson rather than a wife.

By transgressing into her husband's realm of "business," Ivana blurred the strictly delineated patriarchal hierarchy within and beyond the home. At the same time, she denied to him the feminine softness and support he expected. Elsewhere in the book, wives are "nagging," "gripping," and "bitching." "If [a husband] doesn't lose the ballbreaker," Trump advises, "his career will go nowhere." A [man dominated in the bedroom](#) cannot hope to maintain authority in the boardroom. Trump expressed a similar view in a [1994 interview](#): "I tell friends who treat

their wives magnificently, get treated like crap in return. Be rougher and you'll see a different relationship."

In another passage from *The Art of the Comeback* that classicist Jon Hesk [has already compared](#) to Semonides, Trump identifies three types of potential wives based on their responses to pre-nuptial agreements:

There are basically three types of women and reactions. One is the good woman who very much loves her future husband, solely for himself, but refuses to sign the agreement on principle ... The other is the calculating woman who refuses to sign the prenuptial agreement because she is expecting to take advantage of the poor, unsuspecting sucker she's got in her grasp. There is also the woman who will openly and quickly sign a prenuptial agreement in order to make a quick hit and take the money given to her.

This passage shares with Semonides more than just the delineation of women into unappealing types. As in both Hesiod and Semonides, wives are fundamentally an economic threat and connive to lay claim to the goods for which their husbands have toiled.

Trump elsewhere casts even women who are not *his* potential romantic partners in the role of "bad wife." Like Semonides, he [tends](#) to demote women to the status of animals. In 2006 he famously said of Rosie O'Donnell, "Can you imagine the parents of Kelli [Carpenter, O'Donnell's wife]...when she said, 'Mom, Dad, I just fell in love with a big, fat pig named Rosie?'" He similarly has [disparaged](#) Ariana Huffington as a "dog," while on [another occasion](#) he took explicit aim at her as a wife: "I fully understand why her former husband left her for a man. He made a good decision." Trump hurls such denigrations when women issue challenges to his masculine authority.

It is deeply troubling for the United States to have as a sitting president a man who has routinely spouted such misogyny, his election a seeming national endorsement of it. And the ramifications are grave, particularly when so many members and would-be members of Trump's administration — not only Rob Porter but also Steve Bannon, Andrew Puzder, and indeed Trump himself — have been embroiled in allegations of domestic abuse, as outlined by [Jessica Valenti in *The Guardian*](#) and [David Frum in *The Atlantic*](#). The larger administration, despite the few high-profile women in it (whom [Jill Filipovic has termed](#) Trump's supportive “work wives”), reflects the patriarchal tenor of its chief. Given this environment, it is unsurprising that the Trump Administration [defended Porter though aware of his abusive past](#). Even after his departure, [Trump continued](#) to wish him well and send him hopes for a “wonderful career.”

Trump's misogyny is [by no means exceptional](#) — he simply gives voice to it through the loudest megaphone. To too many, he is an alpha male, a tell-it-like-it-is manly man. He epitomizes a [kind of toxic masculinity](#) that is too frequently reiterated in living rooms and bedrooms and dorm rooms. Sometimes it quietly simmers — sometimes it explodes.

Such misogyny has changed too little from ancient Greece to today because power structures in the home have not sufficiently changed; marriages often remain organized along hierarchical lines that favor husbands. We still frequently think of wives as caregivers that *owe* their husbands support without receiving equal support in turn. Even when wives work equal hours for equal pay, for example, they still do [significantly more](#) of the household chores and childcare. When power disparities are tipped toward men, moreover, [abuse and violence ensue more often](#) than when they are tipped toward women.

The ways wives are checked echo and multiply outward through the broader world. Demonizing women as “bad wives” reflects the larger misogynistic mechanism whereby women are attacked for claiming traditionally male privileges and authority as their own. The way we silence female speech within the home, for instance, is easily replicated [on the senate floor](#). We expect not only the [wives of male politicians](#) to fulfill expectations of the “good wife” but [female politicians themselves](#) — and we [distrust them when they do not](#). Women’s power and authority in the state are intricately bound to their power and authority in the home.

Antipathy toward wives is but one of misogyny’s many complexly interrelated manifestations. Yet it is at the very root of the phenomenon, and we are still entangled in its legacy. Classicists have an important role to play [not only in combating](#) incorrect readings of the ancient past exploited in support of hateful ideology but also in [acknowledging and exposing](#) aspects of antiquity that [fall in line with it](#). Tracing the thread of misogyny from past to present better enables us to break our tie with this ancient inheritance once and for all.