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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Gender Politics of Maid Characters in *The Odyssey*: Power, Performance, and Survival

Aijun Tang
Associate professor of Xianda Economic and Humanistic College, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China
Corresponding Author: Aijun Tang, **E-mail**: 0810010@xdsisu.edu.cn

| ABSTRACT
This paper examines the maid characters Eurycleia and Melantho in *The Odyssey*, applying Michel Foucault's concept of micro-power and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Drawing upon legal inscriptions, archaeological findings, and social practices of the Archaic period (8th–5th centuries BCE), the study investigates how gender and class intersect in the domestic sphere. It argues that Eurycleia's so-called loyalty emerges from the internalization of patriarchal discipline and emotional labor, granting her a circumscribed "service-oriented agency." In contrast, Melantho's behavior, often labeled transgressive, reflects an improvisational strategy under structural violence. These contrasting trajectories reveal the literary mechanisms that reflect and reproduce gender-class hierarchies in ancient Greece, while also illuminating the limits and ambiguities of female agency within oppressive systems.

| KEYWORDS
The Odyssey; Maid Characters; Micro-Power; Gender Performativity; Archaic Period

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Research Questions

A masterpiece of ancient Greek heroic epic, *The Odyssey* not only recounts Odysseus' legendary ten-year journey home but also presents the basic structure and cultural values of ancient Greek society. In previous studies, researchers predominantly focused on themes such as Odysseus' practice of *themis* (justice) (Finley, 1978) and Penelope's politics of chastity (Foley, 1981), giving relatively less attention to the maids who occupy marginal positions within the household. However, these domestic servants, referred to as *oiketes*, as intermediaries connecting the "public sphere" (*polis*) and the "private sphere" (*oikos*), their behavioral choices and fates often reveal the mechanism of power interaction in a patriarchal society.

This paper selects Eurycleia and Melantho, two maids of contrasts, as research objects. The core questions include: How does the intersection of gender and servile status shape their roles within the household? What forms of agency, if any, do they exercise? How do these representations reflect or reproduce broader sociopolitical realities in Archaic Greece during the 8th-5th centuries BCE?

1.2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This paper adopts a dual theoretical framework. From Michel Foucault (1977), it takes the notion of micro-power: that power operates not solely through institutions but also via everyday practices and embodied norms. The household, as a disciplinary space, becomes a key site of this power's diffusion.

From feminist theorists Joan Scott and Judith Butler, the study draws on the idea that gender is not a fixed identity but a social performance. Scott's concept of gender as a signifier of power relations and Butler's theory of gender performativity together

offer tools to understand how maids, situated at the intersection of class and gender oppression, navigate the constraints of their identities. Notably, while Foucault emphasizes how power disciplines bodies through surveillance and routines, Butler shifts the focus to how identity is reiterated through repeated social performances. These frameworks complement each other in analyzing maid characters: Eurycleia's bodily obedience reflects Foucauldian discipline, while her repetitive acts of compliance—such as deference and silence—also exemplify Butler's gender performativity. The concept of "performance of loyalty" thus bridges the two: it refers both to the internalization of household discipline and to the enactment of socially scripted femininity. This dual lens reveals how forms of agency are both produced and constrained by normative expectations.

For the maid group, this "gender performance" is further complicated by their slave status. As female-slave with overlapping identities, their performance of gender norms is not only a response to patriarchal expectations but also a survival strategy under class oppression. This paper thus introduces the concept of "performance of loyalty" to specifically analyze how Eurycleia, through repeated practice of compliant behaviors, constructs a model slave image recognized by the power structure—this form of performance, while constrained by discipline, also contains limited agency for survival and resource acquisition within the oppressive framework.

Scholarly research in this field has formed a solid foundation: Sarah Pomeroy (1975) was the first to systematically sort out the legal status of women in ancient Greece, pointing out that enslaved women were in a "rightless vacuum"; Froma Zeitlin (1995) analyzed the domestic space in *The Odyssey* and revealed the subordinate position of female characters in the power structure, but did not delve into the internal differences among the maid group; more recent scholarship such as James Redfield (2013), although focusing on slave characters, emphasizes economic functional analysis and lacks a gendered perspective. This paper attempts to achieve an in-depth interpretation of maid characters through the cross-application of dual theoretical frameworks, building on existing research.

1.3 Research Methods and Structure

This paper adopts methods of both close textual reading and historical verification: the textual analysis is based on Fagles' English version of *The Odyssey* (1996), with key terms verified against the ancient Greek original (Murray, 1919); historical verification integrates multiple evidences such as Archaic period legal documents (e.g., the *Gortyn Code*), archaeological materials (images of maids on Athenian pottery), and contemporary poetry (Hesiod's *Works and Days*).

Section 2 examines Eurycleia's performance of loyalty, emphasizing her constrained agency. Section 3 analyzes Melantho's resistance and the disciplinary responses it provokes. Section 4 compares the two maids to uncover the gendered logic of domestic power, with a particular focus on contrasts with male servant figures like Eumaeus. The final section reflects on broader historical and contemporary implications.

2. Eurycleia's Performance of Loyalty: Discipline Acceptance and Service-Oriented Agency

2.1 Role Background and Overview of Core Plots

Eurycleia is a senior maid in the palace of Ithaca. The text clearly states her origin: "She was a slave bought by Laertes, who nursed Odysseus when he was an infant, holding a higher position than other maids but remaining a slave" (*The Odyssey* 1.429-432). In the epic narrative, her core actions include: guarding the secrets of Penelope's boudoir, recognizing Odysseus by his scar, and assisting in cleaning the palace after the slaughter of the suitors. These actions made her a key assistant in Odysseus' revenge plan, ultimately earning her the reward of "exemption from labor" (22.475-478).

2.2 Construction of Compliance Virtue Under Patriarchal Discipline

Eurycleia's loyalty first manifests as the internalization of patriarchal norms of femininity. Ancient Greek society regarded "compliance" (*eukolia*) as the core virtue of women, which in domestic slavery was expressed as absolute obedience to the master's will. The *Gortyn Code* clearly stipulates: "Slaves must unconditionally execute the reasonable instructions of their masters; those who disobey may be punished with flogging or imprisonment." This legal discipline was transformed into conscious awareness in Eurycleia's behavior—when Penelope doubted Odysseus' identity, she immediately vouched with "the master's honor" (23.103-105), placing the master's interests above all else.

Her identity as a nurse strengthened the acceptance of this discipline. In ancient Greece, a special emotional bond often formed between wet nurses (*tithonos*) and those they nursed. This emotional attachment made Eurycleia's loyalty transcend mere utilitarian calculation, becoming a form of "emotional compliance." Scenes of "wet nurses breastfeeding" are common on Athenian pottery, confirming the role of this position as an emotional intermediary in the household. However, it should be noted that this emotional connection did not alter the inequality of power; Eurycleia's "right to nurse" was essentially a limited authority granted by the master.

2.3 Information Advantage and Power Boundaries in Private Space

Eurycleia's agency is concentrated in her control of "bodily secrets." When Odysseus returned home disguised as a beggar, only she recognized the master through the boar bite scar discovered while washing his feet (19.462-475). This scar, an imprint from Odysseus' youth hunting, belonged to private family memories. As executors of daily household care, women naturally possessed such bodily knowledge. Foucault regarded this "bodily discipline" as an important way of power operation. In this case, Eurycleia temporarily gained the right to define "heroic identity" through confirming the bodily mark.

But this agency had strict boundaries: firstly, her information advantage was limited to the "private sphere" (*boudoir*, bathroom) and never extended to "public decision-making"; secondly, her actions always served the goals of the male master—after recognizing Odysseus, she immediately "obeyed the instruction to remain silent" (19.480-482), returning the core of power to the male. As Foley (1993) noted, women's agency in ancient Greek literature often took the form of "servile resistance," and Eurycleia's case is a typical example of this characteristic, with her limited power performance ultimately reinforcing the stability of the patriarchal order.

3. Melantho's Transgressive Behavior: Intersecting Oppressions and Resistance Dilemmas

3.1 Role Background and Overview of Core Plots

Melantho is a maid figure in sharp contrast to Eurycleia. The text clearly identifies her as: "A young slave bought from Lesbos, taken as a handmaid by Penelope but having an affair with the suitors" (18.325-326). Her core actions include: mocking the disguised Odysseus (18.322-330), participating in the suitors' feasting and revelry, refusing to recognize the returned Odysseus (22.177-180), and ultimately being punished with "lifelong labor" after the slaughter of the suitors (22.420-425).

3.2 Survival Strategies and Gendered Exploitation Under Slavery

Melantho's transgressive behavior needs to be examined in the context of intersecting gender-class oppression. As a "slave bought from a foreign state" (*xenos doulos*), she lacked the emotional attachment and household status that Eurycleia possessed. Records related to the slave trade during the Archaic period indicate that the living conditions of foreign slaves were harsher. In the context of Odysseus' long absence and the suitors' actual control of household resources, allying with power holders became a survival choice for marginalized women.

Her sexual relationship with the suitors was essentially a product of sexual exploitation under slavery. Schaps (1979) found through studies of court speeches that the perception that "the bodies of maids belong to their masters' property" was widespread in ancient Greek households, and masters' sexual possession of maids was regarded as a legitimate right. Melantho's behavior was condemned in the text as "shameless" (18.328), a moral judgment that masked the institutional violence of slavery—when maids' bodily autonomy was completely deprived, the standard of judgment for "chastity" itself became a form of power oppression. Slave shackles unearthed in Athens are material evidence of this bodily control.

3.3 Misrecognition of Resistant Stance and Disciplinary Mechanisms

Melantho's verbal attack on the disguised beggar Odysseus constituted an indirect challenge to patriarchal authority: "You dirty beggar, get away from the feast at once; there is no place for you here" (18.327-328). This challenge had a dual paradox: on the one hand, she mistakenly identified the core of power (Odysseus) as the edge of power (a beggar), exposing the cognitive limitations of marginalized groups regarding the power structure; on the other hand, this seemingly blind resistance was actually an emotional outburst after long-term suppression, a distorted expression of subjective consciousness.

Her fate confirmed the operational logic of Foucault's "disciplinary power"—the public punishment of transgressors was essentially a deterrent to other potential resisters. This form of punishment was highly consistent with the "provisions on the punishment of resistant slaves" in the *Gortyn Code*. The tragedy of Melantho lies in the fact that her resistance failed to break through structural oppression, but instead became a negative example reinforcing the patriarchal order, her fate warning all marginalized women that any transgressive behavior would incur severe retaliation.

4. Comparative Analysis: Maid Characters and Ancient Greek Gender-Class Order

4.1 Structural Origin of Differences

The contrast of Eurycleia and Melantho stems not from personal morality but from their positions within the social structure. Eurycleia's position as house-born and elderly grants limited protection; Melantho, young and foreign-born, has none. The social scripts available to each differ drastically, as Butler's theory of performativity shows: one conforms, the other improvises.

Identity as a legal and emotional construct lies at the core of their divergence. As a "house-born slave" (*oikogeneia*), Eurycleia's identity was rooted in generational proximity to the master's family: it is emphasized that she "nursed Odysseus from infancy" (1.430), forging bonds of emotional dependency that functioned as both protection and constraint. This status aligned with the

Gortyn Code's provisions, which granted household-born slaves limited privileges—such as exemption from sale—that reinforced their investment in the household's stability. In contrast, Melantho, labeled a "foreign-acquired slave" (*xenos doulos*) from Lesbos (18.325), lacked such emotional or legal anchors. Without intergenerational ties to the oikos, her survival depended on adapting to shifting power dynamics rather than upholding tradition. Butler's concept of "performativity" illuminates this: Eurycleia performed loyalty to the *oikogeneia* identity script she was assigned, while Melantho's lack of such a script forced her to improvise—with perilous consequences.

Age and bodily politics further stratified their options. Eurycleia's advanced age ("grey-haired" and "wise with years," 19.360) transformed her body from an object of sexual potential to a vessel of "experiential authority." In a society that valued seniority, her role as a "confidante of generations" (4.124) granted her a precarious respectability, allowing her to navigate household conflicts with greater impunity. Her body, no longer subject to sexual exploitation, became a site of knowledge preservation—most notably through her recognition of Odysseus' scar, a secret entrusted only to long-serving household members. Melantho, by contrast, is described as "young and beautiful" (18.326), her body commodified as both labor tool and sexual object. The suitors' exploitation of her ("they used her as they pleased," 22.419) reflects the double bind of young enslaved women: their bodies were simultaneously essential to household labor and vulnerable to predation, leaving them little room for agency beyond transactional alliances.

The power vacuum created by Odysseus' absence intensified these structural pressures, exposing the fragility of the household order when its male anchor was removed. For Eurycleia, maintaining traditional norms was a calculated strategy: her loyalty to Penelope and the "memory of Odysseus" (23.104) aligned with her interests as a stakeholder in the household's continuity. As Foucault notes, subordinates often "internalize power structures as survival mechanisms," and Eurycleia's adherence to duty can be seen as such a survival tactic. Melantho's choice to align with the suitors, meanwhile, reveals the adaptability required of those with no stake in the status quo. In a household where resources and protection were controlled by the suitors, her "transgression" was less an act of defiance than a rational response to a power vacuum—albeit one that miscalculated the return of the original authority.

Crucially, these strategies were **constrained choices within a closed system**. Neither maid acted from free will; their options were delimited by laws that categorized their bodies, social norms that devalued their labor, and a household structure that treated them as property. Eurycleia's "virtue" and Melantho's "vice" are thus better understood as adaptations to different positions within the same oppressive framework—proof that in a society where enslaved women's lives were governed by others, survival itself became a form of performance, with loyalty and transgression as competing scripts in a rigged game.

A further contrast can be drawn with the male servant Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd. Like Eurycleia, Eumaeus is a long-serving household slave. However, his loyalty is celebrated in heroic terms, and he is granted narrative space to speak openly, express his moral judgments, and take part in strategic planning (Books 14–21). His masculine identity grants him access to discursive authority and public agency that is denied to Eurycleia. While she must operate within the private sphere, often through silence and discretion, Eumaeus actively participates in restoring Odysseus' authority. His reward—being welcomed as a loyal retainer at the story's end—underscores the gendered dimensions of reward and recognition.

In contrast, Melantho's alignment with the suitors is condemned as betrayal, while male disloyalty (such as Melanthius' treachery) is punished but portrayed with less moral anxiety about bodily impurity or sexuality. This differential treatment reflects how gender shaped not only one's available survival scripts but also how transgression was narrated and disciplined.

Thus, male and female slaves occupied parallel but unequally valued positions in the domestic order. The contrast between Eumaeus and Eurycleia reveals how male gender, even within servitude, could be leveraged for broader social recognition—a privilege female characters lacked.

4.2 Material and Historical Evidences

The fates of Eurycleia and Melantho are not merely literary constructs but profound reflections of the Archaic Greek social structure, where legal codes, material culture, and religious practices converged to reinforce the "gender-class" hierarchy. This interplay between epic narrative and historical reality reveals how power operates through both institutional norms and everyday practices.

At the legal-institutional level, the *Gortyn Code*'s distinction between "*oikogenes*" (house-born slaves) and "agathoi" (foreign-acquired slaves) provides a critical framework for understanding the maids' divergent treatment. The Code explicitly grants household-born slaves limited legal protections—such as the right to possess small property or negotiate manumission—that were denied to foreign slaves. This legal differentiation is mirrored in *The Odyssey*: Eurycleia, described as "nursed in the house"

(1.430), is trusted with Penelope's confidences and Odysseus' childhood secrets, while Melantho, labeled a "stranger bought from Lesbos" (18.325), is denied such intimacy. Foucault's concept of "biopower" illuminates this dynamic: the law categorizes bodies into hierarchized groups, regulating their access to resources and security based on origin—a system the epic reproduces through its moralized outcomes for the two maids.

In terms of material and economic reality, the "household labor scenes" on 7th-century BCE Geometric pottery—depicting women spinning, grinding grain, and serving meals—corroborate the maids' economic indispensability. These visual representations, like the epic's descriptions of Eurycleia's "skill in woolworking" (4.125) and Melantho's role as a "cupbearer to the suitors" (18.326), reveal how female slaves were positioned as the "invisible infrastructure" of the *oikos* (household). Yet their labor was paradoxically devalued: while essential to household survival, it conferred no social capital. This contradiction is echoed in Odysseus' brutal punishment of Melantho despite her years of service—a reminder that enslaved women's labor was deemed disposable; their bodies and work reduced to commodities.

Religious marginalization further entrenches the maids' subordinate status. Household labor scenes on pottery and sacrificial figurines suggest the ritual marginalization of maidservants. For example, maid figurines found at sanctuaries such as Olympia and Brauron—often depicted in subservient postures and made of terracotta—contrast sharply with the grand, marble cult statues of freeborn goddesses like Artemis or Athena (Neils, 1995). These figurines, cataloged in archaeological surveys of domestic votive offerings, provide material evidence of how enslaved women were symbolically situated as laboring bodies, not sacred subjects. Their small scale, modest materials, and humble postures reinforce the ideological divide between elite female representation and enslaved female utility. This material evidence aligns with the epic's silence about maids participating in public rituals like the sacrifice to Athena (3.430-450), where only freeborn women are mentioned. As Scott argues, "religious practice naturalizes hierarchy by marking certain bodies as worthy of sacred participation and others as profane." In *The Odyssey*, this is manifested through Eurycleia's exclusion from the suitors' feasts (reserved for free citizens) and Melantho's forced participation in their "unholy revels" (22.418)—both scenarios reinforcing their status as "ritually liminal" beings.

The epic's portrayal of maid characters thus functions as a discursive technology that naturalizes the "gender-class" order. By rewarding Eurycleia's compliance with "release from toil" (22.476) and punishing Melantho's transgression with perpetual servitude, the narrative encodes the *Gortyn Code*'s norms into a moral fable: obedience to the hierarchy brings security, while resistance invites destruction. Yet the text exposes the fragility of this order through the description of both maids' agency—whether Eurycleia's strategic silence (19.480) or Melantho's defiance (18.328). As Butler's gender performativity theory suggests, such repeated acts of compliance or resistance can either reinforce or destabilize norms. In *The Odyssey*, the maids' contradictory roles—as both "order-maintainers" and "potential threats"—reveal the inherent tension in patriarchal power: it depends on the very bodies it oppresses to reproduce itself, granting them a precarious agency that always risks subverting the system.

This convergence of legal codes, material culture, religious practice, and literary representation demonstrates that the maids' fates are not arbitrary but symptomatic of a society where gender and class oppression were mutually reinforcing. The epic does not merely reflect this system—it *performs* it, using narrative to naturalize inequality as the "natural order" while containing the disruptive potential of marginalized bodies.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the complex mechanisms of power operation in ancient Greek society through a detailed analysis of the two minor characters in *The Odyssey*. Eurycleia's "loyalty" and Melantho's "transgression" are not simple moral opposites but two survival strategies of marginalized women under "gender-class" dual oppression: the former gained limited living space by accepting discipline, her agency strictly confined within a "service-oriented" framework; the latter attempted to break through norms but failed due to cognitive limitations and institutional violence. These two paths collectively point to a harsh reality—in the patriarchal society of the Archaic period, any choice of marginalized women could hardly truly escape structural oppression.

From a historical context, the literary construction of maid characters was closely related to social transformations during the 8th-5th centuries BCE: the rise of the polis system promoted the development of domestic slavery, the increasing number of maid groups making them objects of social concern; at the same time, the strengthening of patriarchal ethics required literary works to shape female images conforming to norms. The epic's praise of Eurycleia and condemnation of Melantho were essentially literary maintenance of the gender order under slavery, but the text also unconsciously exposed the contradictions of this order: needing maids' loyal service while fearing their potential transgression; acknowledging women's functional value in household space while strongly suppressing the growth of their subjective consciousness.

Notably, this research has profound practical implications for contemporary society. The "service-oriented agency" demonstrated by Eurycleia can be contrasted with the phenomenon of marginalized women in contemporary workplaces gaining limited

development space through behaviors that meet power expectations, revealing the common dilemma of marginalized groups' agency expression across different historical periods—their acquisition of power often depends on accepting discipline. The reinterpretation of Melantho's "transgressive behavior" breaks the cognitive misunderstanding of simply moralizing the survival choices of marginalized women, providing a historical reference for reflecting on the stigmatization of poor women and marginalized working women in contemporary society, reminding us that when judging the behaviors of vulnerable groups, we should first examine the structural oppression behind them rather than simply engaging in moral accusation. This dialogue across time and space is precisely the important value of classical literary research in the contemporary era.

The limitation of this study lies in the fact that the epic, as a literary text, reflects historical reality selectively. Future research can combine more archaeological materials and legal documents to further explore the actual living conditions of enslaved women in ancient Greece. However, it is undeniable that the maid characters in *The Odyssey* have opened a window for us to glimpse the life experiences of marginalized women forgotten by history, and such listening and interpretation of marginalized voices has always been the core mission of gender studies.

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