

OLD WOMEN IN THE ODYSSEY

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Introduction

As an old woman celebrating a friend on her way to becoming an old woman, I should perhaps have chosen a text which describes old age in a positive light. Homer, I'm afraid, does not romanticise this stage of human life.¹ The normal prose word for old age, *geras*, occurs regularly in Homeric language,² and the epithets attached to it are 'baneful' (*lygron*), 'hated' (*stygeron*), 'destructive' (*oloon*), 'hard to bear' (*chalepon*), and 'even-handed' (*homoion*), this last probably in the sense that old age does not distinguish between high and low, male and female, but is an evil common to all. Old age is not a topic to be discussed; instead, as is typical for Homeric style, its nature is exemplified by means of characters in the poems. Among them appear some important old men and women. At one end of the spectrum is the happy and harmonious Nestor, who already in the *Iliad* is presented as respected for his wisdom and former courageous deeds, and in the *Odyssey* is depicted as enjoying a peaceful old age in Pylos together with his wife Eurydice and surrounded by a large number of flourishing adult sons. At the other end is the Trojan royal couple, Priam and Hecuba, who once ruled a rich and prosperous community, but in the *Iliad* gradually decline into the quintessence of a miserable old age, in which everything of importance has been lost – power, wealth, sons – and if you should be killed, your dead body will be a shameful sight (XXII. 74–6).³

There is one positive epithet attached to *geras*, *liparon*, meaning 'shiny' or 'glistening,' as when skin has been anointed with oil. Richmond Lattimore translates with 'sleek.' The adjective occurs in three connections, all in the *Odyssey*. Menelaus describes Nestor's *geras* as *liparon*, as befits the idealised king of Pylos (4.210). The seer Teiresias foresees that Odysseus may reach this kind of old age, and here the epithet is qualified by "around you your people will be blessed" (11.136, 23.283). Finally, Odysseus' old nurse Eurycleia laments her master's cruel fate even though he used to give rich offerings to Zeus, praying to be allowed to "reach sleek old age and rear his excellent son" (19.367–8). It seems that sleek old age manifests itself for a king when his subjects are prosperous, and for a father when his son thrives, but also that this kind of old age belongs to the realm of wishes rather than to reality. When Penelope famously laments that the gods grudged her and her husband spending their youth together until reaching the threshold of old age (23.211–12), it is implied that to her old age would have seemed bearable at the end of such a life.

¹ I use the name 'Homer' for all Homeric poetry, preserved or lost, and speak of the 'poet/singer/rhapsode' of a given text. I consider all the preserved Homeric poems composed/dictated by one rhapsode each. Cf. Jensen 2011.

² Contrary to the idea of 'happiness,' as recently pointed out by Andersen 2011.

³ Nicholson & Heintges 2010, 131, also underline Nestor and Priam as the examples of happy and tragic old age respectively.

Ladies and nurses

Being heroic epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have men in their prime as their main protagonists. However, there is also room in the Homeric world for a broad range of other types, persons of both genders, belonging to different social strata, and of various ages. For decades now, scholars have been interested in the fact that women have a major role to play in the heroic world.⁴ In what follows I shall let a small catalogue of old women populating the *Odyssey* enter the stage. The *Catalogue of Women* proper (11.225–327) is left out, since that catalogue is concerned with the origins of important families,⁵ and only women of child-bearing age are listed.

The poem features three dignified old upper-class ladies, Nestor's wife, Odysseus' grandmother, and his mother.⁶ Nestor's wife Eurydice occurs in one verse only (3.452). At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus' son Telemachus leaves Ithaca to go out in the world and seek information about his absent father, he first visits Nestor in Pylos in the company of the goddess Athena herself. On the morning after Athena's visit when the old hero gives a rich offering to the goddess, Eurydice is mentioned as one of the women who screamed when the sacrificial victim was slaughtered. Being present and named, she adds to the picture of Nestor's household as the ideal heroic family, but she is without identity in the poem. Similarly, Odysseus' grandmother Amphithea is briefly mentioned when we learn how as a young man he visited his grandfather Autolycus; she embraced him on his arrival, and that's that (19.416–17).

Odysseus' mother Anticleia is given more attention. The most sensational of the many fabulous events Odysseus experienced on his way back from Troy was his visit to the underworld. He came there because the goddess Circe had advised him to seek counsel from the dead seer Teiresias about his return journey, and she had given him detailed instructions about how to proceed. When Odysseus arrived there and had performed the proper sacrifices, a mass of dead souls approached. One belonged to a comrade who had recently died and not been buried, and Odysseus had first of all to promise him to perform the necessary rites in order for him to enter Hades. However, the first of those who emerged from the realm of the dead was his mother's shade, and Odysseus burst into tears, for she had been alive when he left for Troy (11.84–9). Immediately after the dialogue with Teiresias Odysseus gives his mother access to the blood of the sacrificial victims, the means by which the dead souls become able to communicate, and the two of them share the most detailed dialogue the hero has with any of the souls of the dead (11.152–224)⁷. The meeting between mother and son is affectionate and highly emotional. Odysseus learns that what had killed her was his absence. A very respectable cause of death for an elderly mother! and a touching expression of the warm feelings between the two. Another sign of their love is the detail of the embrace: Odysseus tries to put his arms around her, but finds no physical presence, and cries out in frustration (11.204–23).

The scene is emotional, but also informative: the dead mother offers her son his first briefing on the situation on Ithaca, though without mentioning the suitors. It may be read as another implicit description of Anticleia's virtues that she gives most attention to the state of her husband Laertes, dwelling upon the sad way of life he has chosen. Out of mourning for son and wife he has left the palace and is living a poor and rough life in the countryside;

⁴ Cohen 1995 and Doherty 1995 were pioneers.

⁵ Pade 1983.

⁶ I include her because she represents the generation before Odysseus, even though she was perhaps not very old when she died; the swineherd Eumaeus says that she reached "immature old age" (*omon geras*), whatever that may mean (15.357).

⁷ Doherty 1995, 110, emphasises the important place Odysseus gives his mother in his description of the visit to Hades.

especially, she describes how humbly he sleeps, lying on the floor covered with rags. It is noteworthy, also, that when Odysseus asks about his wife, the mother-in-law is absolutely loyal to Penelope. She states that she is patiently waiting for her husband, crying for him day and night. Furthermore, Anticleia exhorts her son to be attentive to the information she gives about the nature of the dead soul “in order that later you can tell your wife” (11.181–3 and 223–4, cf. 23.325).

Anticleia is mentioned in passing elsewhere, and small pieces of information are added to our picture of her. In a story of how young Laertes bought a beautiful slave girl the narrator states that Laertes actually wanted to make love to her, but did not, because he feared his wife’s anger (1.433). More information is contributed by the swineherd Eumaeus. When he tells the stranger (= Odysseus) his life-story, Anticleia has an important role in it. As a little boy Eumaeus was bought by Laertes and brought up in the royal household together with Ktimene, Anticleia’s own daughter. Only when the latter came of age and was married off to a husband on another island was Eumaeus sent out to look after the swine, but first Anticleia had carefully provided him with everything he needed for his new way of life. Afterwards the two of them, Anticleia and Eumaeus, used to meet and talk occasionally as long as she was still alive (15.361–70. How to handle the information about Odysseus having an otherwise unknown sister need not bother us here.) In the story of how Odysseus as a young man visited his grandfather and participated in a dramatic boar hunt, Anticleia was present with her husband when their son returned home and related what he had experienced (19.462–6).

With these small pieces of information the portrait of an old lady who died of grief for her son is given colour and individuality. They afford glimpses of a determined young woman whose anger had to be respected, and who cared for the children in her household, whether they were her own or not. Later in life she lived in harmony with her daughter-in-law, Penelope. Her worries about the state of her husband and her premature death reveal a loving wife and mother. Perhaps she would actually have been on her way towards sleek old age had it not been for the Trojan War.

Anticleia is the daughter of Autolycus, an ambiguous and disturbing figure, a master of lying and stealing and therefore the object of many people’s hatred (19.395–408). This is an aspect of her background the rhapsode leaves unused, having chosen instead to describe her as a model wife and mother.

Beside these two old ladies, the poem features a short list of old slave women. Especially Eurycleia, the slave girl Laertes dared not go to bed with, develops into an important figure in the course of the poem, and she is the main topic of the present study. Interestingly, among all the old women, high and low, she is the one described with most care. In her nature she exhibits a full range of feelings from love to hatred, and through her reactions to the events we are given insight into the conditions of a slave’s life. But first let us consider the minor characters.

They are not many, and they all belong to royal households, where they look after their masters, nurse them when they are small or grow old, and take care of their every wish. Old Laertes has such a helper, mentioned already when in the first book Athena relates how he moved into the countryside. She is not honoured with a name, but just called “an old woman from Sicily.” The impression given is that without her Laertes would not have been able to survive under the harsh circumstances he had chosen there (1.191–2, 24.211–12). It comes as a surprise when Odysseus finally visits his father, and it turns out that she has both husband and sons (24.388–90).

Young Nausicaa, the fairy princess in Phaeacia, has a nurse called Eurymedusa. She is from Apeira (a location in nowhereland) and seems to have entered the household as a captive of war; it is said that she had been brought by ship and been selected as an award to Alcinous because he was the lord of all Phaeacians (7.7–13).

In the palace on Ithaca old Eurynome is to be found. She suddenly makes her appearance in Book 17 speaking with Penelope and cursing the suitors. She is called *tamie*, housekeeper or treasurer, but she acts rather as if she had been Penelope's nurse. Penelope calls her 'mother' while she her mistress 'child,' and she is the closest the poem comes to giving Penelope a confidante (17.495–504). When Athena makes Penelope decide to descend into the hall where the suitors are feasting, Eurynome is the person to whom the heroine reveals this plan (18.163–86). Besides this Eurynome performs a few small duties, mentioned in passing (19.96–101, 20.4, 23.153–5, 289–95). She is a vague figure without any individual characteristics, and she has sometimes been considered a double of Eurycleia.

In short, female old age in the *Odyssey* is represented by three aristocrats and a small number of trusted servants. The Sicilian who looks after Laertes is given neither name nor title. Eurymedusa and Eurycleia are called *trophoi*, women who have cared for a master or mistress since they were babies; of Eurycleia it is stated that she began as Odysseus' wet nurse (19.482–3). She is also once called *tamie*, in a situation when she is actually handling provisions in the household's storeroom (2.345), and that is Eurynome's title. As a group these women convey the impression that society would break down without their unobtrusive presence. The same holds good, of course, of the host of maids who surround the protagonists, most of them anonymous and without any indication of their age, but compared to them the old *trophoi/tamiai* stand out as much more individualised.

Were they an indispensable part of the tradition, or could rhapsodes invent them as they pleased? It seems certain that the existence of such old, trusted women personally attached to a protagonist by having been his/her wet nurse or at least by having brought up their master/mistress from childhood was inherent in the tradition. When in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* the goddess disguises herself as a poor old woman, this is the role she chooses (*h.Cer.* 103–4). Also, the fact that the *trophos* is a well-known character in Attic tragedy, a genre closely related to epic, suggests that the tradition supplied the rhapsodes with them as a type with easily recognisable characteristics.⁸ Some of them may also have had a role in myth as individuals, for instance Aithra, who occurs as Helen's maid in the *Iliad* (III.144). In any case, inside the framework given by tradition, the singer was free to form his characters as it suited his plans.

Eurycleia and the footwashing scene

In the second half of the *Odyssey* the hero returns to Ithaca in disguise and only gradually reveals his identity to his family and household. Assuming the role of a beggar he enters the palace and moves among the suitors. At a certain point when he has made himself a familiar figure in the hall, Penelope arranges for him to meet her late in the evening after all guests have left the palace. She takes a liking to the stranger and offers to let him have his feet washed by Eurycleia. As soon as the old woman sees a remarkable scar on his leg deriving from when he participated in a boar hunt as a young man, she recognises her master (19.343–504).

The scene has now and then been represented in pictorial art. Christine Havelock, who subjects these images to a careful analysis, discusses them in relation to how the story is told in the *Odyssey*. The characteristic event leaves no doubt as to what is going on in the pictures, Odysseus having his feet washed and his identity revealed, but the representations are all in various ways different from the text we know. While in the poem the scene takes place between Odysseus and Eurycleia alone, other persons such as Eumaeus, Penelope, or Telemachus occur in the pictures. Besides, the representation of Eurycleia deviates from the text: she is not characterised by being old, and on an Attic red-figure *skyphos* from c. 440

⁸ Karydas 1998 follows the *trophos* from epic into drama; however, her positive description of Eurycleia's social status seems to me romanticised.

B.C. she is even given the name of Antiphata. Havelock explains this as a result of the painter's limited literacy; she imagines that the artists were building on their memory of oral performance rather than on the reading of a written text.⁹

However, such a relationship between written text and images is not restricted to this scene. Rather it is the normal situation where events from the Trojan War are concerned. I have argued elsewhere that the written *Iliad* and *Odyssey* remained largely unread until well into the 4th century B.C., and that even after they gradually became better and better known, they belonged to the educated minority, while a living epic tradition continued with rhapsodes entertaining audiences wherever they were to be had, singing stories of the wars of ancient times as they had always done, unhampered by the fact that two special versions had been taken down from dictation. Illustrations on vases and other materials allow us a glimpse into the multiforms of Homeric performance.¹⁰ To me, then, a *trophos* called Antiphata is a witness to a different realisation of this scene from the Trojan tradition than the one we have in the *Odyssey*, and the phenomenon reinforces the hypothesis that the *trophoi* were part of the Homeric tradition as a type rather than as individuals.

The passage has been much commented upon, most famously by Erich Auerbach, who used it to argue that Homeric narrative regularly moves in the foreground without any sense of a background¹¹. His thesis was rejected by Adolf Köhnken, to my mind successfully¹². Köhnken analysed the narrative and showed how the careful ring-composition facilitates the passage between digression and main plot for the audience. Also, he pointed out that the figure of Eurycleia is in itself a connecting link between main plot and digression. To this may be added, I think, that the audience of an oral epic would be well informed in advance of the story to be told. As John Miles Foley has argued,¹³ singer and audience meet in a 'performance arena' to which both parties bring their knowledge and have their ideas of what is supposed to take place in the text that is to be performed. Contrary to Auerbach's thesis listeners provide the background themselves and have no difficulty in remembering the overall plot even if the narrative takes them into a longish digression.

Eurycleia's role is also central to another interesting discussion of the narrative style in this passage, the question of who focalises the story of the boar hunt. Irene de Jong, who introduced the term 'focalisation' into Homeric studies,¹⁴ argues in her commentary on the passage that it can be analysed as embedded focalisation with the verb 'she recognised' (19.392) as the shifter, even though Eurycleia is referred to in the third person and was not present at the boar hunt. Actually, the hunting story ends stating that on his homecoming the young Odysseus told everything carefully to his father and mother. With the role the *trophos* is given in the poem she would naturally have been present.¹⁵ The reading is attractive. Not only has Eurycleia with her tears and her speech moved dramatically into focus so as to steal the show from both Penelope and Odysseus, but the long story of how the hero received his scar features Eurycleia as a key figure in his life. It is difficult to imagine who else would assign the nurse such an important role as to be the person who brought the baby to his grandfather and asked him to decide on the child's name. As a matter of fact, an ancient or medieval reader felt provoked by this detail and added in the margin of the manuscript *Harleianus* 5674 that Eurycleia's name ought to be replaced by Anticleia's. If we understand the story as Eurycleia's recollection of the crucial hunting event, the atmosphere in the room

⁹ Havelock 1995; the *skyphos* shown as pl. 56.

¹⁰ Jensen 2011, especially 237–47.

¹¹ Auerbach (1946) 1953.

¹² Köhnken (1976) 1995.

¹³ Foley 1995, 47–9.

¹⁴ de Jong 1987.

¹⁵ de Jong 2001, 477.

becomes even more intense than what the recognition in itself causes: in the background are Penelope and her maids, in the foreground not only Odysseus and Eurycleia, but also her memories of Odysseus' grandfather, of her master's early childhood and youth, and of his close ties to herself.

Eurycleia's poem

Eurycleia enters the poem already at the end of Book 1, when after an eventful evening Telemachus is led to his chamber by his old nurse. She is briefly presented to the audience as the daughter of Ops, the son of Peisenor. When she was very young, Laertes had bought her with his own means and paid twenty oxen for her.

That her father's and grandfather's names are mentioned indicates that she was not born a slave. Rather, like Eumaeus, she had been born free, but had by some misfortune been separated from her parents and put up for sale as a slave. At that time she had been young and beautiful. Now she is old, and as we are later told, she has been the nurse, first of Odysseus and then of his son. Among the slave women she was the one who loved Telemachus most dearly, it is stated.

This old woman leads the young man to his room, carrying torches for him. There he sits down, takes off his *chiton* and gives it to Eurycleia, who smooths it out, folds it, and hangs it on a peg next to the bed. Then she leaves the room and closes the door behind her. No words are said. The quiet little scene with its everyday tasks conveys an atmosphere of complete familiarity between the two, and of peace and tranquility before the important project the young man will launch next day when he is off to Pylos (1.428–42).

In that project Eurycleia is, again, an unassuming, but important participant. She goes with Telemachus to the storerooms, and the two select the provisions necessary for the young man's crew. She is the only person in the household to be informed about the plan, and Telemachus is very explicit when he forbids her to mention the journey to anybody, least of all his mother. When at a later point Penelope nevertheless learns about Telemachus having left the island and about the ambush her suitors have prepared for him, Eurycleia has to admit that she had been informed in advance. As a slave woman she has had no choice but to obey her young master, and unwillingly she has become a part in the ongoing conflict between mother and son about the leadership of the household (2.345–80, 4.742–57).

When the focus shifts from Telemachus to Odysseus, Eurycleia disappears from the poem, and many books pass before she reappears. However, the very moment Telemachus reaches his home she is there. He arrives, and the first person to see him is Eurycleia, who together with the other slave women runs to embrace him. Also later in the poem Eurycleia is in the hall, working, when Telemachus enters and immediately speaks to her. Evidently, he takes for granted that she is there. Nevertheless, the detail that on his homecoming he meets her before anybody else underlines the special function she has had in connection with Telemachus' journey and the affectionate relationship that ties the old woman and the young man together (17.31–3, cf. 19.15–30, 20.128–59).

So far Eurycleia has acted first and foremost as Telemachus' former nurse, but with the footwashing in Book 19 her relationship with Odysseus moves to the foreground. When the hero specifically asks Penelope to have his feet washed, not by one of the arrogant young maids, but by an old woman "who in her mind has suffered as much as I" (19.347), Penelope immediately selects Eurycleia, not because of her sufferings, but because she has been her husband's nurse and taken care of him right from his birth. The similarity in suffering between old slave woman and old-looking poor stranger is changed into the similarity in age between the stranger and the lost husband; even though Penelope considers her guest to be older than her husband she realises that "people age quickly in misfortune" (19.360), and that her husband may actually look as old now as does the stranger.

At the mention of Odysseus the old woman breaks into tears. When Eurycleia saw Telemachus at his return it was briefly mentioned that she embraced him, but here she is allowed to give full vent to her feelings. In a highly emotional speech she addresses her absent master, appealing to him by the word *teknon*, as if he were her own son (*teknon* is derived from *tiktein*, to give birth). Abruptly she turns to the stranger and underlines that she is not only ordered by her mistress to wash his feet, but also herself willing to do so. Again, as a slave she has no choice, but here she is herself eager to render this service to the stranger because he bears a close resemblance to Odysseus (19.361–81).

When she recognises him, Odysseus' reaction is brutal. He commands her to keep silent and assures her that however much she once breast-fed him, if he succeeds in killing the pretenders she will not be spared when he kills the slave-women of the household. She is not frightened, however, but describes her loyalty to him as being just as unbreakable as iron or stone. Apparently she accepts without further ado that her master may kill her if he feels that would be necessary. Lillian Doherty draws attention to the fact that it is more difficult for Eurycleia to be trusted by her master than for the male slave Eumaeus.¹⁶ Not only does she not react against Odysseus' brutality; she eagerly promises to list the guilty maids for punishment (19.487–98).

This is our first glimpse of another side of Eurycleia, a scary, grim woman filled with hatred, and this is the side that is dominant during the further events. She acts as the steady helper of Odysseus and Telemachus in the revenge act. First, she ensures that the female slaves are locked up, and next she points out to her two masters the twelve maids who have not been loyal to Penelope and Telemachus. They are ordered to haul out the dead bodies into the courtyard and afterwards clean room and furniture of blood. Next, Telemachus takes them to the courtyard and hangs them. At no point is it suggested that she might feel pity for them, or for the suitors (21.380–87, 22.390–434, 480–501).

When she enters the hall where Odysseus and Telemachus, soiled with blood, are surrounded by the dead bodies of the suitors, Eurycleia's immediate reaction is to break into a triumphant howl, *ololyge*. Eurycleia exults at the victory over the suitors and the punishment of the disloyal maids in a far more blatant fashion than what any of her masters expresses. Odysseus actually seems shocked, and he reprimands her in her a brief didactic speech about how this manslaughter is the work of the gods, a just punishment, and that it should be accepted in silence (22.407–16). When afterwards she is sent up to her mistress Penelope to reveal the news to her, she does so *canchaloosa*, laughing her head off. The verb is onomatopoeic, imitating the sound of loud laughter. She finds the slaughter of the suitors great fun! To Penelope she says: It would really have warmed your heart to see him standing there among the dead bodies, soiled with blood just like a lion (23.1–84). Eurycleia has been full to the brim of hatred. Where does this violent feeling come from?

The reasons for this have been discreetly built up during the preceding description of the situation in the palace. Eurycleia is the person who has been in charge of the daily routine, and what that meant is shown in a small vignette the morning after the footwashing. The maids first light the fire; next, the floor must be trampled, blankets put in the chairs, the tables must be washed, drinking vessels cleaned, and water fetched from the spring. The volume of the work is suggested by the fact that merely to fetch water twenty maids are sent off (20.122–3, 147–59). Eurycleia's job is important, and she fulfills it with great zeal. Like the head of any other big business, she is last to go to bed at night and first to get up in the morning.

However, there is little satisfaction to be found in hard work done for arrogant guests. The desperation of it all is not expressed by the competent old housekeeper, but by a little slave

¹⁶ Doherty 1995, 153–5.

girl who as part of a team of twelve has been grinding wheat all night. In his bed in the hall Odysseus has just prayed to Zeus for an omen and his prayer is fulfilled, first by thunder and next by the following event (20.108–19):

*...The others,
since they had finished grinding their wheat, by now were sleeping,
but this one had not ended her work, and she was the weakest.
She stopped the mill and spoke aloud, a sign for her master:
'Father Zeus, you who are lord of the gods and people,
now you have thundered loud from the starry sky, although
there is no cloud. You show this forth, a portent for someone.
Grant now also for wretched me this prayer that I make you.
On this day let the suitors take, for the last and latest
time, their desirable feasting in the halls of Odysseus.
For it is they who have broken my knees with heart-sore labor
as I grind the meal for them. Let this be their final feasting.'*¹⁷

Eurycleia could have said the same prayer, but only when at last the pretenders and their supporters have been killed, does she give vent to her unbridled exultation.

In one of the recently found fragments of Sappho's poetry¹⁸ the poetess laments that old age has made her limbs stiff so that she is no longer able to dance as when she was young. For Eurycleia there has not been much dancing.

With the last glimpse we are given of the old woman the scary, vindictive side of her is hidden away. Together with Eurynome, she is ordered to make the bed for the reunited couple, and thus her story in the poem is arranged in an elegant circular composition, with the introductory scene in Telemachus' bedroom being balanced by the final preparing of Odysseus' and Penelope's marital bed (23.177–80, 289–92). The poem of Eurycleia works as a side action weaving its way along the epic proper, but retaining its own inner logic.

An underlying fairy tale pattern

In his 'pool of tradition' the rhapsode also had a fairy tale pattern.¹⁹ Many years ago I argued that the plot of the *Odyssey* follows the five moves of the fairy tale, as analysed by Bengt Holbek.²⁰ The poem is not, of course, a fairy tale; my contention is that the rhapsode is familiar with fairy tale patterns. The *Iliad* poet now and then reveals that fairy tale motifs occur in his tradition, too, as when in the Meleager story King Oeneus is bringing sacrifices to all the Olympian gods but forgets Artemis and thus enrages her (IX.533–40), while the *Odyssey* poet actually builds up his whole performance on a fairy tale pattern.

Holbek showed how fairy tales handle three oppositions, low-high, young-adult, and male-female, and do so by means of eight tale-roles: low young male, low young female, etc. The tale roles may be doubled, tripled, etc., and they may be split so that, for instance, a tale role is divided between a good and a bad character. Such a split may be activated all the way through the narrative or occur only in some passages.²¹ In the epic with its numerous characters the roles are multiplied many times: the role of the low young male is filled in by Odysseus, but

¹⁷ Lattimore 1965, 301.

¹⁸ "The Tithonus Poem," fr. 58. Cf. Obbink 2009.

¹⁹ For the term 'pool of tradition' see Honko 1998, 66–74.

²⁰ Jensen 1993, Holbek 1987. Holbek's model is "exclusively concerned with tales which end with a wedding or with the triumph of the couple who were cast out earlier in the tale," Holbek 1987, 404. It is the masculine version of this tale type I see activated in the *Odyssey*.

²¹ Holbek 1987, 416–19.

also by Telemachus, that of the high young female by Penelope, as well as by Calypso, Circe, and Nausicaa.

What interests me here is that Eurycleia, too, may be seen as doubling Penelope's role, this time in the form of a split so that Eurycleia takes on the brutal sides of the tale role, while Penelope may stay pure and mild. The poet spares the heroine any connection with the manslaughter. She remains quietly asleep while the killing and cleaning take place, in fact on waking she declares that it is a long time since she has slept so well (23.15–19), and thus her hands are not polluted by blood. At the point when Odysseus has completed the slaughter of the suitors and Eurycleia enters, she suggests that she should go upstairs right away and tell Penelope, but Odysseus prevents her (22.428–32). Eurycleia the *trophos* not only takes on the duties otherwise belonging to mother and housewife, but also the negative potential in her mistress's character.

Conclusion

A basic idea in the Homeric world is that you have to accept what the gods send. As Odysseus says to another slave, Eumaeus: Your life story has moved me, but after all, Zeus gave you both good and bad since you ended up in the house of a man who ensures that you have what you need and can lead a good life (15.486–91). In the *Iliad*, Achilles expresses the same opinion when he tells old Priam how Zeus has two great jars, one filled with good, one with bad, from which he distributes his gifts to humans as he pleases (XXIV.527–33).

However, the spectrum between happiness and tragedy is broader for high than for low. Without exactly achieving the standard of a Nestor, free old men may be respected for their wisdom, acquired during a long life, such as the two old men participating in the assembly in Ithaca, Aigyptios and Halitherses (2.15–257). In an interesting chapter on old age in Homer as compared to traditional societies Thomas M. Falkner discusses their position, showing how they conform to a general rule defining the roles of elderly men as advisers to chieftains, members of councils, authoritative dispensers of information, or mediators in cultural disputes.²² Similar possibilities are not there for slaves. Eumaeus and Eurycleia, the two best known slaves in the *Odyssey*, may both achieve a certain degree of happiness, but there are no respected social positions waiting for them at the end of their lives, and should they be killed, their deaths would be no tragedy, as is clear from the threat with which Odysseus reacts to Eurycleia's recognition.

Despite the seemingly harmonious relationship between masters and slaves in the *Odyssey* the distance between high and low is not veiled. William Thalmann spoke of "the poem's self-conscious presentation of a justly hierarchical society,"²³ and Lillian Doherty underlined that being both female and slave made for the harshest conditions: "the conjunction of gender and class inferiority is insurmountable in the *Odyssey*."²⁴ More recently, Kelly L. Wrenhaven described Eurycleia as the prototype of the "good" slave, emphasising her slavish obedience, but disapproving of her cruel side.²⁵

There is no rebellion in the *Odyssey*. At the same time, however, it is striking that the poet has a keen eye for humble domestic duties and those who perform them, even in the world of heroes. His insight goes as far as to know what submission may do to the character of a person. One of Eurycleia's many tasks is to instruct young maids, a job that consists in teaching them how to comb wool and tolerate slavery (22.422–3). A Greek woman who did not belong to the very highest social stratum, whether she was slave or free, spent most of her life producing textiles, combing wool, spinning, and weaving. In Eurycleia's words, the

²² Falkner 1995, 5–14.

²³ Thalmann 1998, 20.

²⁴ Doherty 1995, 159.

²⁵ Wrenhaven 2012, 109–11.

combing of wool summarises female work, and beside that what a slave girl needs to learn is to accept suppression. It seems that she has herself learnt this to perfection. Not only has she accepted slavery, she supports her masters totally. When at a certain point she explodes in extreme cruelty, her opponents are not her masters, but their enemies. Not an attractive portrait, but a psychologically convincing one. As readers, we may again ask whether she has had a choice; perhaps her stand was necessary for her survival. To a slave woman, Zeus tended to give more bad than good.²⁶

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²⁶ I am grateful to John D. Kendal for revising my English.

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Latin summary

De mulieribus veteribus in Odyssea. Cum Odyssea sit epos heroicum, ibidem frequenter apparent actores mares optimā aetate vitae agentes. Nihilominus in poemate etiam attenditur ad personas humiliores, inter quas mulieres quoque veteres. Sunt quidem paucae, sed magni momenti. Nonnullae earum ad summum stratum sociale pertinent, reliquae sunt servae. Speciatim eadem sunt τροφοί, nutrices, et suggeritur tales nutrices esse partem necessariam uniuscuiusque magnae domūs familiaeque. Earum notatū dignissima est nutrix Ulyssis Eurycleia, cui partes agenda sunt toto in poemate. Cum eius historiam ab initio poematis usque ad eiusdem finem sequamur, animadvertimus hanc historiam esse poema in poemate, quod propriam cohaerentiam internam habet. Nutricis autem indoles est ambigua: nonnullis in scaenis eadem est summa curae atque affabilitatis, aliis in scaenis est ferox, tantopere ut reddatur persona maxime terribilis huius poematis. Quibus autem ex causis illa odii plena est? Propter duram vitam servae. Assuefacta est sorti suae et solidaritatem illaesam cum dominis suis demonstrat, cum tamen eo magis se offensam sentiat copiā laborum, qui effecti sunt ab cultoribus celebrantibus. Ceterum schema traditionale fabularum totum epos percurrit, cum Penelope et Eurycleia easdem partes fabulae explent bonum atque malum inter se distribuentes.

English summary

Being a heroic epic, the *Odyssey* is peopled by male protagonists in their prime. Nevertheless, the poem gives attention also to humbler figures, among them old women. They are few, but important. A couple of them belong to the highest stratum of society, the rest are slaves. Especially, they are *trophoi*, nurses, and the impression given is that such nurses are an indispensable part of any big household. The most impressive of them is Odysseus' nurse Eurycleia, who has a role to play all the way through the poem. When her story is traced from beginning to end it unfolds as a poem inside the poem, with its own inner coherence. Her

character is ambiguous: in some scenes she is the quintessence of care and kindness, in others she is brutal, so much so as to make of her one of the scariest characters in the poem. What has made her so full of hatred? the hard life as a slave. She has accustomed herself to her fate and shows unbroken solidarity with her masters, only to feel all the more offended by the amount of work the feasting suitors have caused. Besides, a traditional fairy tale pattern runs as an undercurrent through the epic, with Penelope and Eurycleia filling in the same tale role so that good and bad is split between them.

Keywords

Old age, Women, Slaves, Eurycleia, Fairy tales, Homer, Odyssey.