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Epic Ways of Killing a Woman: Gender and Transgression in the *Odyssey*

Except for discussion of the method, the death of the twelve unfaithful serving maids in the *Odyssey* receives little comment. Yet Telemachus' disobedience of Odysseus' instructions has larger implications for the interpretation of the *Odyssey*. Although ordered by Odysseus to kill the serving maids with a sword (*xifésin tanuêkesin*, 443), Telemachus engineers a strange mass-hanging instead (465-71), involving a ship's cable (*peisma*, 465), a pillar (*kionos*, 466), and a *tholos* (466), with the women compared to thrushes or sparrows. I will explore the imagery of the various parts of this hanging.

There is little information available for the status of hanging in archaic times, but Loraux has shown that in classical Athens it was dishonorable. Yet hanging is not what Odysseus had intended for the maids. The difference between death by sword and by rope is one of honor, but it is also one of sexual penetration versus inviolability. No blood is shed in a hanging. It is therefore, at least physically, very clean. Yet Telemachos characterizes it "not clean" (*mê katharôî*, 462). Following the lead of Greek gynecological texts (in which there is a connection between the vagina and mouth), I shall argue that their death by rope rather than by sword marks the aberrant sexuality of the serving maids, as Telemachus suggests at 464. His method, in fact, serves as a corrective to Odysseus, who has not fully understood what the women's betrayal means in its larger context. There are also unnoticed gender reversals that play a role in the interpretation of this passage, and important connections with the suicide of Antigone in Sophocles' play. So often overlooked, the description of the maids' deaths proves to be a tightly and carefully constructed scene that becomes, in terms of its imagery, a microcosm of the whole poem, reinforcing the central importance of loyalty in the *Odyssey*.