

## Mrkrgrnao: Joyce's Rough-Tongued Melantho in *Ulysses*

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James Joyce's *Ulysses* is dominated by a cast of male characters, and yet looming over the breadth of the entire novel is a feminine presence. Molly stalks the mind of Leopold Bloom throughout the day. May Dedalus haunts Stephen's dreams as he sleeps as well as his waking conscience. Gerty MacDowell, Miss Lydia Douce, Miss Mina Kennedy, Dilly Dedalus, Martha Clifford, Bella Cohen, and many other women consciously or subconsciously pull the strings above the heads of all the male characters. Even the cloud which blots out the sun, seen by Bloom and Stephen, mocks with a feminine authority: "...Stephen attributed to the reappearance of a matutinal cloud (perceived by both from two different points of observation, Sandycove and Dublin) at first no bigger than a woman's hand" (*U* 17.40-43). It is as though a woman is overshadowing the novel. These women, like the men, are representative of various characters from Homer's *Odyssey* from which Joyce uses as a scaffold for *Ulysses*. Just as Bloom is Odysseus and Stephen is Telemachus, Molly is Penelope, Bella Cohen is Circe, and Gerty MacDowell is Nausicaa. However, there is one Homeric figure who has gone unnoticed in Joyce's book: Melantho. This oversight can be forgiven because her Joycean avatar isn't human – she's feline.

For the sake of authenticity and accuracy, I will be quoting from the Samuel Butcher and Andrew Lang translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Keri Elizabeth Ames notes in her article, "Joyce's Aesthetic Double Negative and His Encounters with Homer's *Odyssey*" that, "The prevailing assumption...that the Butcher and Lang translation was Joyce's only source for *The Odyssey*, surely derives from Frank Budgen's recollection: 'As a work of reference for his *Ulysses* he used the Butcher-Lang translation of the *Odyssey*.' Budgen does not," Ames continues, "however, state that it was the only translation Joyce used, and it is difficult to determine at what date Budgen remembers this occurring, although it seems likely that it was in Paris" (2005, p. 28). It was in Paris

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Joyce was writing *Ulysses* and so all textual evidence from Homer's epic poem will come from this translation.

Even though Odysseus had fought for ten years in Troy, recorded in *The Iliad*, and spent another arduous decade making his way home to Ithaca, the Greek hero was still a model of male excellence. In Book VI of *The Odyssey*, as Odysseus spies Nausicaa from afar on a beach, Homer writes, "And forth he sallied like a lion mountain-bred, trusting in his strength, who fares out blown and rained upon, with flaming eyes..." (2005, p. 54). Shortly after, Homer describes Odysseus in fuller detail:

...then Athene, daughter of Zeus, made him greater and more mighty to behold, and from his head caused deep curling locks to flow, like the hyacinth flower. And as when some skillful man overlays gold upon silver – one that Hephaestus and Pallas Athene have taught all manner of craft, and full of grace is his handiwork – even so did Athene shed grace about his head and shoulders (2005, p. 55).

And yet, this is not how Melanthe sees Odysseus at the end of Homer's epic. In order to conceal his identity in order to gain further information about his household during the long absence, Athena disguises Odysseus in Book XIII:

Therewith Athene touched him with her wand. His fair flesh she withered on his supple limbs, and made waste his yellow hair from off his head, and over all his limbs she cast the skin of an old man, and dimmed his two eyes, erewhile so fair. And she changed his raiment to a vile wrap and a doublet, torn garments and filthy, stained with foul smoke. And over all she clad him with the great bald hide of a swift stage, and she gave him a staff and a mean tattered scrip, and a cord therewith to hang it (2005, p. 116).

This is the Odysseus Melanthe sees when the reader first encounters her in Ithaca. With her king's appearance disguised as an old beggar, Melanthe's true nature can be seen on full display without fear of reprisal.

In Book XVIII, after Odysseus wishes to stay in the palace as a guest, the suitors looking to replace him and marry Penelope, as well as some of the servants, laugh at him.

And the fair Melanthe chide him shamefully. "Melanthe, that Dolius begat, but Penelope reared, and entreated her tenderly as she had been her own child, and gave her playthings to her heart's desire. Yet for all that, sorrow for Penelope touched not

her heart, but she loved Eurymachus and was his paramour.  
Now she chid Odysseus with railing words... (2005, p. 156).

Despite being raised by Penelope, queen of Ithaca, and given all she could ever want, Melanthe had an affair with Eurymachus, one of the lead suitors seeking to usurp Odysseus as king. It is a striking betrayal.

In chapter four, also known as the “Calypso” episode, the reader of *Ulysses* first encounters the protagonist representing Odysseus: Leopold Bloom. It is the early morning of June 16, 1904 in Dublin and he is preparing breakfast for his wife. Upstairs, his wife, Molly, is slowly waking up. It has been nearly a decade since the two of them have had sexual relations. Not coincidentally, it was around ten years ago that their son, Rudy, passed away after only eleven days. While Molly eventually recovered from the loss, Bloom apparently had not and still associates sex and Molly with death. This complication leads Molly to have an affair later that day with Hugh “Blazes” Boylan. Strangely, Bloom is aware of the impending affair and does nothing to stop it. Perhaps it is out of a sense of his own responsibility and guilt or an excitement of his wife being with another man. Throughout the novel there is evidence of both motives. Boylan’s Homeric avatar is Eurymachus, the manipulative suitor seeking to replace Odysseus as king of Ithaca. Joyce was conscious of Eurymachus, as revealed in his 1922 notes while writing *Ulysses* when he pens, “Eurymachus offers damages” (James Joyce Digital Archive). This note refers to a line in episode seventeen: “Suit for damages by legal influence or simulation of assault with evidence of injuries sustained (self-inflicted), not impossibly” (*U* 17.2203-2205). While this specific reference is unrelated to Melanthe, it alludes to Eurymachus’s attempt to pay Odysseus reparations at the end of *The Odyssey* and proves Joyce’s knowledge of the character. But just as Penelope remains faithful to Odysseus while Molly is not and Odysseus is an example of peak masculinity and Bloom falls far short of that, not everything is as it seems. So, if Molly is Penelope and Boylan is Eurymachus, then where is his lover, Melanthe? “Mrkrnao! the cat said loudly” (*U* 4.32).

This jumble of consonants and vowels is the sound of the Blooms’ cat, Pussens. In his article, “‘Mkrnao! Mrkrnao! Mrkrnao!’: The Pussens Perplex”, John Gordon explores the cat’s three different cries:

Writing about this passage [Pussens’s phonetic sounds in ‘Calypso’] in a great footnote,” Gordon writes, “Hugh Kenner remarked that laboratory researchers of the late twentieth

century, armed with the most sophisticated audio equipment, had determined that a cat has at its disposal ‘9 consonants, 5 vowels, 2 diphthongs an umlaut and an *a:ou* sound which begins as *a* while the mouth is open but ends as *ou* while the mouth gradually closed’...and that Joyce had obviously been way ahead of them (2009, p. 34).

While Pussens is clearly exploring the range of her phonetics, Joyce curiously uses these particular letters to describe the sound. One theory stems from Pussens’s audible communication: “Mrkrgrnao!” (*U* 4.32). There are eight letters that begin with “M” and end in “O”. The name Melantho also has eight letters that begin and end in those same letters. In fact, the very first voice heard in the Bloom residence of the novel isn’t Bloom or Molly; it’s the cat. Her “Mkgnao” (*U* 4.16) precedes Bloom’s “O, there you are” (*U* 4.17). And then there’s the almost imperceptible pattern. Bloom says to the cat, “Milk for the pussens” (*U* 4.24), which is immediately followed by, “Mrkgnao! the cat cried” (*U* 4.25). Bloom later says, “I never saw such a stupid pussens as the pussens” (*U* 4.31), which is again immediately followed by, “Mrkrgrnao! the cat said loudly” (*U* 4.32). Imagine if your name was Melantho, but everyone called you Pussens. Other than the first phonetic expression, which is the first of the chapter, every sound the cat makes is preceded by Bloom calling her Pussens. It almost seems as though Pussens is attempting, in the limited lexicon of feline language, to express her real name: Melantho!

Interestingly, Terrence Doody and Wesley Morris, in their article, “Language and Value, Freedom and the Family in ‘Ulysses’”, come close to making the association between Pussens and Melantho. They write:

Odysseus and Penelope had a son, Telemachus, but Penelope was given as a ward a young girl, Melantho, whom she raised like a daughter, only to be betrayed by her, and this patterning is just congruent enough to make us realize that Boylan does not belong in the essential equation, that he is really a distraction (1982, p. 228).

However, while Doody and Morris connect Melantho’s betrayal to Boylan, they don’t connect Pussens to Eurymachus. For this we need to delve into Joyce’s *Ulysses* further.

Early in the “Calypso” episode, while Bloom is making breakfast for Molly, Joyce writes:

He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out...The cat walked stiffly round the leg of the table with tail on high (*U* 4.12-15).

In this subtle metaphor, Bloom – the cuckolded husband, is the kettle. He sits there, doing nothing to stop the affair of his wife, “dull and squat,” his is phallic “spout stuck out”. Meanwhile, the cat walks around with various erect descriptions in a mocking manner. She walks “stiffly” around a “leg” of the table with “tail on high”. Just as Melanthe chides Odysseus while suitors, including her own lover, seek the attention of his wife, Pussens appears to taunt Bloom over his apparent impotency.

Melanthe’s exact chiding of Odysseus in Book XVIII includes literary parallels to Bloom in *Ulysses*. In the Homer’s epic, she insults Odysseus with:

Wretched guest, surely thou art some brain-stuck man, seeing that thou dost not choose to go and sleep at a smithy, or at some place of common resort, but here thou pratest much and boldly among many lords and hast no fear at heart. Verily wine has got about thy wits, or perchance thou art always of this mind, and so thou dost babble idly. Art thou beside thyself for joy, because thou hast beaten the beggar Irus? Take heed lest a better man than Irus rise up presently against thee, to lay his mighty hands about thy head and bedabble thee with blood, and send thee hence from the house (2005, p. 156).

In *Ulysses*, despite it not being the traditional Irish pub fare, Bloom chooses a glass of wine for lunch as he says, “Let me see. I’ll take a glass of burgundy...” (*U* 8.740). It could certainly be considered that wine has got about Bloom’s “wits”. Also, Melanthe sends Odysseus from his house. It is in this chapter of *Ulysses* that Bloom leaves home to go get his own breakfast. And so, after Pussens’s various feline phonetics, Bloom is sent “hence from the house”.

As Bloom watches Pussens strut around the table, he becomes aware of her location as though there is almost a malicious intent behind it. Joyce writes, “The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writing-table” (*U* 4.18-19). Twice Joyce mentions the cat’s mewing in the same sentence. It is an emphasis that cannot go unnoticed. It was twice that Melanthe chided Odysseus as well. Also, twice Joyce refers to Pussens’s movements as stalking. Again, there is a tone of mockery or sense of superiority reflected in the cat’s behavior around Bloom, much like Melanthe and Odysseus. Bloom even notes that

Pussens “stalks over my writing-table” as though she is knowingly disregarding his personal property, ignoring the boundaries of ownership. Melanthe banished Odysseus from his own home where she herself was staying, thus becoming one of his many usurpers. Additionally, Bloom says to the cat while feeding her, “Milk for the pussens,” (*U* 4.24). Just as Melanthe enjoys the food and shelter of Odysseus’s home while withholding respect and reverence to him, Pussens enjoys the same treats of life with similar attitude.

Furthermore, there is the description of Pussens which could be easily overlooked. Joyce writes, “Mr. Bloom watched curiously, kindly the lithe black form” (*U* 4.21). The presence of a black cat, so common in literature, can be taken for granted. However, nothing in Joyce’s works is random or carelessly written. While writing *Ulysses*, Joyce had apparently been working an entire day, editing two sentences. According to Frank Budgen, Joyce said, “I have the words already. What I am seeking is the perfect order of words in the sentence. There is an order in every way appropriate” (1960, p. 20). With that level of attention paid to his novel, we can assume that even the description of Bloom’s cat is layered with intentionality. Of course, there is the common Western superstition of black cats bringing bad luck. This is certainly applicable to Odysseus and Bloom. However, it is also possible that Joyce – an author familiar with the languages and customs of cultures around the world – would have known about how the Japanese viewed black cats. It is a popular Japanese superstition that a woman who owns a black cat will have many suitors. The symbolic synchronicity here is unavoidable as both Molly – the owner of Pussens – and Penelope – the adoptive mother of Melanthe – are faced with suitors.

In a fascinating segment of introspective thought and inner monologue, Bloom considers the cat and himself, thinking:

They call him stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it. Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me (*U* 4.26-29).

In the first sentence, “they” is unknown, but is likely people in general that Bloom knows. In the same sentence, “him” must be a reference to Bloom himself in the third person perspective as the cat is female. Bloom’s fellow Dubliners and acquaintances must think him stupid, likely because Molly’s flirtatious attitude toward

other men – even Boylan – is well-known and yet Bloom acts oblivious. The reader of *Ulysses* knows from episode seventeen that Bloom suspects Molly has had many lovers when Joyce writes, “Assuming Mulvey to be the first term of his series, Penrose, Bartell d’Arcy, professor Goodwin, Julius Mastiansky...” (*U* 17.2133-2134). Bloom goes on to imagine that Molly has had twenty-five lovers in total, though we find out from Molly’s soliloquy at the end of the novel, the number is far fewer. The quote continues regarding the cat. She is vindictive and cruel. These traits certainly apply to Melantho in her treatment of the disguised Odysseus. Even when Bloom considers how much bigger he is than the cat, he concludes that she can jump him. In Odysseus’s feeble state, masquerading as an old man, Melantho certainly had the physical advantage.

The lines about “Curious mice never squeal” and “Seem to like it” are clearly reflective of Bloom’s cuckolding. He knows of the impending affair and yet says nothing to Molly or Boylan throughout the day. However, there is also another meaning behind it. If Melantho is Pussens, the cat, then the curious mouse who never squeals and seem to like it would be Eurymachus. Bloom later considers, “Wonder is it true if you clip them they can’t mouse after” (*U* 4.40-41). Pussens, like Melantho, is not clipped, or neutered, and thus is quite sexually active. And still, the cat-and-mouse metaphor continues.

We know that Joyce was familiar with the literary works of English sixteenth century writer Robert Greene because in episode nine while Stephen is publicly criticizing William Shakespeare in the National Library, he says, “He had a good goatsworth of wit...” (*U* 9.245). Greene’s most popular pamphlet, attacking Shakespeare, was called *Greene’s Goats-Worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance*. The reason that Joyce was familiar with Greene’s works is important because in *Never Too Late*, another of the sixteenth century author’s works, Greene writes, “...I fear, because I have overlooked in love, I shall be overlaid in love. With that he sighed, and *Mirimida* smiled and made this reply. Why *Eurymachus*, a man or mouse? what, is there any cedar so high but the slowest snail will creep to the top? any fortune so base but will aspire, any love so precious but hath his price? What *Eurymachus*, a cat may look at a king, and a swain’s eye hath as high a reach as a lord’s look” (1886, p. 181). *Never Too Late* is a prodigal son story, not unlike *The Odyssey*. Here, Eurymachus is compared to a mouse and then he is told that “a cat may look at a king”, reminiscent of how Melantho stands up to and looks down on Odysseus or how Pussens views Bloom. While this may be a stretch of literary evidence, given Joyce’s

well-read knowledge of English authors, it cannot be dismissed. Melantho is the cat and Eurymachus is the mouse in this deadly relationship.

Also, in the same above quote we've been analyzing, Bloom considers of cats and then Pussens specifically, "They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to" (*U* 4.26-27). There is a sense of intuition innately built into cats, specifically here with Pussens. Fascinatingly, even Molly suspects a similar trait in her cat as revealed in her soliloquy at the end of the novel. She ponders in her stream-of-conscious style:

...I love to hear him [Bloom] falling up the stairs of a morning with the cups rattling on the tray and then play with the cat she rubs up against you for her own sake I wonder has she fleas shes as bad as a woman always licking and lecking but I hate their claws I wonder do they see anything that we cant staring like that when she sits at the top of the stairs so long and listening as I wait always what a robber too... (*U* 18.933-938).

Pussens's seemingly affectionate act of rubbing against her is out of self-interest. This is reminiscent of Melantho who was raised and given everything by Penelope, only to betray her with lustful greed. Molly also suspects the cat may have fleas, that she isn't as innocent as she looks. She even goes so far as to consider her claws and the physical threat Pussens may pose. And in a similar manner to which Bloom was contemplating cats' sixth intuitive sense, Molly considers how Pussens seems to see things that she can't, such as robbers. Melantho, the maidservant, sees all of the suitors – or robbers – in Penelope's house, seeking to usurp Odysseus.

The readers are reminded of Melantho's connection to Penelope when Bloom watches Pussens ascend the stairs. "The cat went up in soft bounds," Bloom muses. "Ah, wanted to go upstairs, curl up in a ball on the bed. Listening, he heard her [Molly's] voice: Come, come, pussy. Come" (*U* 4.468-471). It was Penelope who essentially raised Melantho and so it is Molly who the cat desires, not Bloom. The cat runs up to Molly, who is still in bed – the same bed she will have the affair with Boylan in later that day. Both Molly and Melantho have affairs with men they shouldn't. And one cannot avoid the sexual connotations in Molly's beckoning of Pussens.

Then there is the excerpt in which Joyce shows Bloom watching Pussens, making keen observations about the cat and yet, as usual, ignoring the subtleties on a more conscious level. Joyce writes:



She blinked up out of her avid shameclosing eyes, mewing plaintively and long, showing him her milkwhite teeth. He watched the dark eyeslits narrowing with greed till her eyes were green stones. Then he went to the dresser, took the jug Hanlon's milkman had just filled for him, poured warmbubbled milk on a saucer and set it slowly on the floor (*U* 4.33-37).

The cat's eyes are described as "shameclosing" as she shows Bloom her "milkwhite teeth". Pussens's "dark eyeslits" narrow "with greed". And yet, Bloom goes to the jug the milkman had filled for him and feeds the cat. It is to Odysseus, in his own home, that Melanthe treats so disrespectfully. She enjoys Odysseus's house and food while shamefully and greedily having an affair with one of his wife's suitors, one of his potential usurpers.

One of the more obvious, while also one of the shortest, references to the cat that are also applicable to Melanthe comes when Bloom asks, "Why are their tongues so rough?" In the Commentary of *Homer: Odyssey, Books XVII-XVIII*, editor and Professor of Classics at Columbia University, Deborah Steiner notes, "His [Odysseus] peremptory order to the maidservants to attend to their mistress and allow him to take over the business of tending the lamps in the hall provokes Melanthe's sharp tongue" (2010, p. 203). Melanthe is commonly given the attribute of a "sharp tongue" due to her blatant disrespect for her concealed master. This is subtly alluded to in Bloom's question regarding Pussens's "rough" tongue.

In Book XIX of *The Odyssey*, Homer recounts Melanthe's second chiding of Odysseus. Within it are more references Joyce borrowed for *Ulysses*. Homer writes:

Then Melanthe began to revile Odysseus a second time, saying:  
'Stranger, wilt thou still be a plague to use here, circling round the house in the night, and spying the women? Nay, get thee forth, thou wretched thing, and be thankful for thy supper, or straightway shalt thou even be smitten with a torch and so fare out of the doors (2005, p. 159).

Interestingly, Bloom and Stephen – Odysseus and Telemachus – return to 7 Eccles Street by the end of *Ulysses*, where Molly had her affair and is lightly sleeping upstairs. In episode seventeen, Bloom is doing exactly what Melanthe is accusing Odysseus of: "circling round the house in the night". Likewise, throughout the day Bloom wanders around Dublin "spying the women" whether it's while purchasing pork kidney at Dlugacz's, on the streets while chatting with M'Coy, or on the beach watching Gerty MacDowell from afar. And in this excerpt of Melanthe's chiding, just

as in the previous one, she threatens Odysseus with being thrown out of the house, “and so fare out of the doors.” In episode seventeen, formatted in the structure of a catechism or Socratic discussion, Joyce writes, “For what creature was the door of egress a door of ingress? For a cat” (*U* 17.1034-1035). Just as the cat enters and exits through the same door, Melanthe was welcomed into the house of Odysseus and it was out of this same house that she met her doom. While we don’t know if she was hanged with the other disloyal servants, it seems likely she met a grim fate given her behavior toward Odysseus. It was the same door she was welcomed in through that she continually tried to throw Odysseus out from.

Lastly, there is one more feline aspect around Melanthe, but this time in connection with a real woman: Katherine O’Shea, better known as Kitty O’Shea. In the mid to late nineteenth century, the most prominent Irish Nationalist seeking Home Rule from the British Empire was Charles Stewart Parnell. In 1880 he met a beautiful woman named Katherine O’Shea and they began a relationship. However, Katherine had been married to Captain William O’Shea since 1867, though they had been separated since 1875. During the affair, which William knew of and, according to Katherine, at times encouraged, Parnell fathered three of her children. When Captain O’Shea filed for divorce in 1889, the adulterous affair became public. “Among Parnell’s largely Catholic supporters, the revelation led to a major controversy and severely weakened his political reputation,” according to Deirdre Moloney in “Land League Activism in Transnational Perspective”. “In 1891, three months after marrying O’Shea, Parnell died at age forty-five” (2004, p. 64).

Katherine O’Shea’s nickname was Kitty, a Hiberno-English version of the name Katherine, but also slang for prostitute. Kitty, who should have been loyal to Captain O’Shea – a member of Irish Parliament, had an affair with Irish Nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell. Melanthe, who should have been loyal to Penelope – queen of Ithaca, had an affair with suitor Eurymachus. Even Bloom was aware of the impending affair between Molly and Boylan, much like Captain O’Shea, and similarly seemed to encourage it at times. Here we have loyalty betrayed by affairs tying together historical Irish figures Joyce was very familiar with, Homeric figures in *The Odyssey*, and Joyce’s characters in *Ulysses*. What better character to represent a woman named Kitty than a female cat?

The similarities between Pussens the cat of *Ulysses* and Melanthe of *The Odyssey* are too many to ignore. Both hover around the ladies of the house. Both are

female. Both are duplicitous. Both take advantage of the men of the house: Bloom and Odysseus. Both show an arrogance to the men of the house. Both are connected by their close relationship with the ladies of the house: Molly and Penelope. Both are suspected by the ladies of the house of being deceitful, even dangerous. Both are keenly aware of potential robbers of the home. Both see much around the house. Both have – at least temporarily – physical advantages over the men of the house. Both have sexual connotations attached to them, particularly regarding affairs. Both possess greed and shame. Both have rough or sharp tongues, commented on by the men of the house. And both find the door to the home a point of entry and exit, both in the literal as well as literary and metaphorical sense.

Far too often people read *Ulysses* with a focus on the male characters as it is their behavior and dialogue that seem to dominate the various scenes. However, when one analyzes these characters further, it becomes clear that their behavior and dialogue are typically either about or influenced by women. It was Melanthe who embodied betrayal in Homer's *Odyssey*, an important theme in the dramatic epic. Betrayal, in its many forms and complications, is likewise a key motif in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Betrayal is all about nuance and deception. Its essence isn't explicit, but rather dependent on its ability to remain somewhat hidden. And so for Homer, Melanthe – the maidservant taken in, raised, and provided for in royal fashion – is the one to turn her back on Penelope, disrespect her rightful king, and have an affair with Eurymachus who is only there to usurp Odysseus. For Joyce, Pussens – the ominously and symbolic black cat with her curiously phonetic cry – is the one to take advantage of Bloom's hospitality, suspected by Molly of having fleas, fearful of her claws, aware of the potential robbers of the house – one of whom Molly herself invited in.

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