

SYMBOLIC MEDIATIONS OF FEMALE LABOUR: TRADITION AND MEDIA

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Citation: Tsangaris, Michael (2026) “Symbolic mediations of female labour: tradition and media”, *mediAzioni* 51: A84-A103, DOI: 10.60923/issn.1974-4382/23380, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This article examines the structural mechanisms by which women’s labour is rendered symbolically invisible or devalued within cultural narratives. Situated at the intersection of folklore, gender, and media studies, the study shifts the analytical focus from the depiction of female activities to the systematic denial of their recognition as work. Using a qualitative, discourse-oriented analysis of the complete corpus of 1,013 traditions compiled in Nikolaos G. Politis’s monumental archive, the text explores how traditional narrative structures organise social life around rigid gender roles. Quantitative and qualitative patterns reveal a marked asymmetry: male representations encompass diverse, highly specialised socio-economic vocations, while female characters are confined to domestic care and metaphysical displacement. The study shows that physical, reproductive, and emotional female work is systematically naturalised as an innate moral duty or an expression of feminine identity, rather than recognised as socially necessary labour. Through a comparative heuristic lens, the article connects these historical folkloric matrices to contemporary media systems, demonstrating how modern representations perpetuate the systematic silencing of female production. Ultimately, folklore and modern media are examined as homologous cultural channels that continually adapt and modernise deeply entrenched gender hierarchies.

Keywords: Invisible gendered labour, Greek folklore, Nikolaos G. Politis archive, Symbolic representation, Media systems.

1. Introduction

1.1. Invisible female labour: continuities between media and folk narratives

In contemporary Greek advertisements, television series, films, and popular songs, women appear to have moved a considerable distance from the traditional figures of the past. We encounter them behind the counter at a bank, in offices, businesses, and professional environments that signal their active participation in public and economic life. Yet, when the narrative returns to the home, the picture changes very little. The same woman remains the one who washes, cleans, cares for children, looks after elderly relatives, and undertakes the invisible labour of sustaining the emotional well-being of the family.

Although these activities require time, effort, skills, and constant management, they are rarely represented as labour. Instead, they are portrayed as natural expressions of feminine identity, acts of love, devotion, and moral responsibility. Care appears as an inherent quality of womanhood rather than as socially necessary work. Thus, while women's presence in the public sphere has become increasingly visible, a significant part of their labour remains symbolically invisible.

This observation raises an important question: do contemporary media representations reflect a new social reality, or do they reproduce older cultural patterns that continue to shape perceptions of gender and labour? More specifically, how is women's labour represented, recognised, or obscured within cultural narratives, and what symbolic mechanisms contribute to its visibility or invisibility?

To explore these questions, this study turns to a corpus of 1,013 Greek folk narratives collected and published by Nikolaos G. Politis between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Widely regarded as the founder of modern Greek folklore studies, Politis assembled an extensive body of oral traditions that offers a unique record of the values, social relations, and symbolic structures circulating in Greek society during a crucial period of national and cultural formation.

This study examines Greek oral folk narratives as communicative forms that convey, shape, and regulate gendered understandings of labour. While traditional narratives have been studied for their historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance, this research argues that the central issue is not simply how women's labour is represented, but how it is systematically denied recognition as labour. The study therefore shifts attention from the depiction of women's activities to the symbolic processes through which domestic, agricultural, productive, and reproductive work is naturalised, moralised, and rendered culturally invisible. It investigates the mechanisms that transform labour into duty, care into virtue, and economic contribution into an apparently self-evident expression of feminine identity.

The article adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from folklore studies, gender studies, and media studies. This approach enables examination of both the thematic content of the narratives and the

representational strategies through which gender roles are constructed, legitimised, and reproduced. Particular attention is given to recurring narrative patterns, symbolic oppositions, and discursive mechanisms that position women as caregivers, helpers, moral exemplars, or dangerous transgressors, while simultaneously obscuring the labour that sustains these roles.

The study also explores significant continuities between the symbolic structures identified in oral folklore and those found in contemporary media representations. The aim is not to suggest a simple or linear transmission of meanings across time, but to examine the persistence of cultural patterns through which women's contributions are idealised, moralised, or occasionally demonised, while remaining structurally undervalued. By tracing these continuities, the article seeks to illuminate the historical depth of representational systems that continue to shape contemporary understandings of gender and work.

Through a combined textual and discourse-oriented analysis of the Politis corpus, the study identifies dominant narrative structures that reproduce gender hierarchies, while also noting tensions, ambiguities, and occasional counter-examples that complicate these patterns. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions concerning the cultural construction of labour, the symbolic economy of gender, and the enduring relationship between folklore and media as systems of social representation.

1.2 Theoretical framework: gender, labour and cultural representation

This study is positioned at the intersection of folklore studies, gender studies, and media studies. Its central focus is not merely the representation of women in Greek folk narratives, but the cultural processes through which women's labour is recognised, devalued, or rendered invisible. In this context, the study draws on scholarship that views cultural narratives as systems of representation through which social roles, identities, and hierarchies are produced and maintained, rather than simply reflected.

A key concept informing the analysis is collective memory. As memory scholars have argued, societies do not preserve the past as a fixed repository of facts; rather, they continually reconstruct and reinterpret it through shared narratives, rituals, and symbolic practices. Folk narratives, therefore, are more than entertainment or aesthetic expression; they function as cultural archives through which communities transmit values, norms, and assumptions about social life. Examining these narratives enables us to investigate how particular understandings of gender and labour become embedded within collective consciousness and are reproduced across generations (Halbwachs, 1925; Halbwachs, 1992).

Within gender studies, labour has long been recognised as a crucial site for the construction of social identities. Feminist scholarship has shown that activities associated with care, domesticity, and social reproduction are frequently treated as natural extensions of femininity rather than as forms of work. Consequently, women's contributions often become culturally undervalued, even when they are indispensable to the functioning of households

and communities. This distinction between labour and its social recognition is central to this study. The primary question is not whether women work in the narratives examined, but how that work is represented, evaluated, and symbolically framed. Social integration is fundamentally based on the internalisation of shared myths, traditions, and symbolic codes that define group identity (Durkheim, 1912; Páez, Insua & Vergara, 1992). From classical philosophy to modern sociology, it is evident that individuals can only become members of a society if they are immersed in a shared symbolic framework (Plato, 2001; Aristotle, 1996; Burke, 1790).

The diversity of gender representations across narrative traditions further highlights the cultural construction of gender roles. Earlier mythological and literary traditions, such as Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, 2001) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 2004), frequently explored transformation, ambiguity, and fluidity in relation to bodies, identities, and desire. In contrast, many of the Greek folk narratives examined in this study tend to organise social life around more stable and clearly differentiated gender roles. This comparison is not intended to suggest a linear historical development, but rather to illustrate how different narrative traditions construct and regulate gender in distinct ways. Such differences reveal the cultural mechanisms through which particular forms of femininity and masculinity become normalised within specific historical contexts.

The analysis also draws on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (1990). Butler argues that gender is not a fixed essence but an effect produced through the repeated performance of socially sanctioned roles and behaviours. Applied to folk narratives, this perspective highlights recurring representations of women's activities and responsibilities. The repeated association of women with caregiving, domestic maintenance, obedience, agricultural assistance, or self-sacrifice may contribute to the construction of these roles as natural and self-evident aspects of womanhood, rather than as socially organised forms of labour.

At the same time, the present study does not treat folklore as a monolithic or uniformly conservative cultural system. Folklore scholars have shown that oral traditions can both reinforce and challenge dominant social values. While many narratives reproduce established gender hierarchies, others reveal tensions, ambiguities, contradictions, and alternative perspectives. As Marina Warner (1994) has argued, traditional storytelling has often provided women with a cultural space to express anxieties, negotiate power relations, resist patriarchal environments, and articulate experiences that may not have been fully visible within official social discourse. Within these frameworks, it is possible to see how storytelling both reproduces patriarchal systems of meaning and simultaneously reflects women's opposition to dominant structures, as well as the historical constraints placed upon female subjectivity and autonomy (Pinkola Estés, 1992).

Finally, the study approaches folk narratives as communicative systems comparable, in certain respects, to contemporary media. Although separated by historical context, technology, and audience, both function as influential mechanisms of cultural transmission. Both circulate symbolic representations, define social expectations, and contribute to the formation of collective

understandings of gender and work. The comparison proposed here is therefore not one of direct historical continuity but of functional similarity. Various social science analyses show that myths and cultural narratives frequently function as discursive formations that legitimise gender asymmetries (Campbell, 1949), while patriarchal role assignments remain visible in contemporary media contexts (Goffman, 1979; Ferguson, 1983; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). By examining how women's labour is represented within Greek folk narratives, the study seeks to illuminate broader cultural processes that continue to shape understandings of gendered work in the present.

1.3 Gender, tradition, and labour in folklore scholarship

The relationship between popular narratives and the reproduction or contestation of gender stereotypes has generated substantial scholarship both globally and within the specific context of Greek folklore studies. Although Nikolaos G. Politis (2013) did not explicitly examine gender dynamics, focusing instead on the empirical collection and preservation of narratives, his monumental volumes are invaluable source material for contemporary analyses of patriarchy, structural power, and rural gender roles in Greece (Koppa, 1985; Kyriakidou-Nestoros, 1978; Gefou-Madianou, 1999). Numerous sociological and anthropological studies have also used folklore to explore the social reproduction of gender inequality and the interaction between traditional practices and modern identity formation (Varvounis et al. 2022; Kantsa 2022; Kokkinos, Kourti-Kazoulis & Skourtou 2022; Bitsilaki, Gasouka & Papadopoulos 2011; Papadopoulos 2011; Giannikopoulou 2011).

This dual capacity of oral tradition to both maintain and disrupt structural roles is strongly supported by international research. Rather than serving as unidirectional tools of domestic containment or simple reflections of reality, cultural narratives encompass a diverse range of social functions, including articulating distinct female experiences, criticising structural inequality (Seifert, 2000; Doherty, 2015), and enabling the systematic exploration and contestation of gendered stereotypes in both folklore and literary traditions (Magnúsdóttir, 2018; Pócs, 1999; Hämäläinen, 2021; Rooth, 1951; McCabe et al. 2011). Thus, even while affirming the persistent durability of patriarchal expectations across many dominant variants (Wulandari et al. 2024; Tanusy et al. 2024; Murray & Alvarez, 2019; Zhou et al. 2022), popular narratives remain fluid, contested symbolic spaces where gender hegemony and subtle resistance constantly coexist.

2. Methodology and theoretical approach

This study examines how the symbolic mediation of women's labour operates in folk traditions and its relationship to the broader cultural structures underlying both historical and contemporary systems of representation. By identifying structural homologies, the research analyses the discursive mechanisms through which women's work has historically been rendered invisible, devalued, or moralised, and how these foundational structures continue to influence

contemporary experiences of gendered work. The study employs a critical, text-based qualitative approach informed by feminist cultural studies and critical discourse analysis. Folklore is treated not as a transparent or objective reflection of empirical past realities, but as an ideologically embedded cultural text and a performative architecture that articulates, reinforces, or potentially challenges dominant representations of gender, power, and the social division of production.

2.1 The Politis corpus: historical context, archival nuances, and methodological limitations

The primary material for this analysis is the monumental ethnographic collection *Traditions of the Greek People* (*Oi paradoseis tou Ellinikou Laou*) by Nikolaos G. Politis (2013), originally published in 1904. This research uses the complete structural corpus of the collection, comprising all 1,013 narratives. Politis, widely recognised as the founder of modern Greek folklore studies, systematically sought to capture, transcribe, and categorise the symbolic universe of Greek tradition, compiling legends, myths, local histories, and cosmological accounts.

To ensure methodological rigour and validity, the specific socio-historical context of this archive's formation must be explicitly addressed. The material does not represent a direct, unmediated recording of oral life; rather, it consists of oral narratives transcribed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through a large institutional network of field correspondents. This network was primarily composed of local schoolteachers, literate professionals, and regional scholars who recorded oral testimonies from rural and semi-urban communities across various Greek regions.

As emphasis has been placed on the ideological conditions of folklore archives (e.g., Kyriakidou-Nestoros, 1978; Rombou-Levidi, 2016), this archival process involved two distinct layers of mediation that warrant methodological caution and reflexivity:

- Gendered positionality of collectors: The vast majority of field collectors and correspondents were men. Their specific positionality and cultural biases inevitably influenced the selection, interview process, and recording of the oral narratives, often marginalising distinct female storytelling contexts.

- Editorial curation: Politis himself structurally edited, selected, and heavily curated these transcriptions to construct a unified, coherent national folklore framework aligned with the nation-building projects of his era.

Consequently, the narratives were captured during a period of intense ideological and structural transition, providing a complex foundation for investigating how gendered labour was encoded in cultural forms at the intersection of vanishing oral contexts and emerging modern national identities. In exploring this corpus, this study adopts an expanded feminist understanding of labour that encompasses domestic, reproductive, emotional, agricultural, and professional contributions, treating work as any form of socially necessary activity that ensures communal survival, cohesion, and continuity.

2.2 Coding strategy, analytical categories, and the comparative heuristic lens

To systematically interpret this extensive corpus, a qualitative and quantitative thematic analysis was conducted. Each of the 1,013 narratives was individually examined and manually coded by the author, who acted as the sole researcher, to ensure conceptual consistency and eliminate inter-coder variability. To map the structural distribution of these representations across the entire archive, the analysis focused on cross-textual presence and thematic repetition rather than intra-textual word counts. If a specific representation appeared multiple times within a single narrative unit, it was recorded only once, allowing for an accurate structural measurement of the prevalence of specific tropes across the 1,013 texts.

Representations of female characters were coded into five primary categories based on their socio-cultural and narrative function:

- Mythical, religious, or metaphysical beings (e.g. fairies, saints, supernatural spirits)
- Domestic and care-oriented roles (e.g. mothers, daughters, housewives, caregivers)
- Productive or agricultural labourers (e.g. farmers' wives, weavers, shepherds, rural workers)
- Women in high-ranking or politically influential positions (e.g. queens, rulers)
- Wage earners, artisans, or independent professionals (e.g. seamstresses, cooks, craftswomen).

The coding process allowed for situational overlaps (e.g. a character acting simultaneously as a mother and a weaver) to avoid rigid typologies that might obscure the complex, dual-burden nature of female lived experience. Crucially, to avoid unsubstantiated overgeneralisations and ground the analysis of female marginalisation, male representations were coded using a parallel framework, mapping their presence across supernatural, productive, and authoritative roles, thereby exposing the comparative gender asymmetries of the collective imaginary.

A clarification is necessary regarding the inclusion of contemporary media references. This study does not conduct a primary, independent empirical or quantitative content analysis of modern mass media or digital platforms. Rather, it establishes a comparative heuristic lens. By placing the narrative mechanisms of the historical Politis corpus alongside the documented findings of contemporary media studies regarding the persistent invisibility of domestic care and occupational segregation (e.g. Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008; Komninos, 2011; Tsangaris & Pazarzi, 2016), the study treats both folklore and mass media as homologous cultural systems. This framework does not conflate oral folklore with mass media, nor does it overlook their significant ontological, technological, and contextual differences in terms of production, reception, and community engagement. Rather, it approaches them strictly through a functional

lens, examining them as cultural channels and ideological apparatuses that perform a parallel societal role: the naturalisation, codification, and intergenerational transmission of gendered hierarchies. This approach demonstrates that the historical devaluation of women's labour is neither an obsolete relic of the past nor merely a mechanism of the modern social system, but the fundamental cultural matrix on which contemporary ideological representations of gendered labour are still founded.

3. Empirical analysis and discussion

3.1 Quantitative patterns of gender representation

The quantitative distribution of gendered representations within the Politis corpus reveals a marked disparity in the cultural imagination regarding male and female social contributions. Male representations encompass an exceptionally broad, multi-dimensional, and dynamic range of social, political, and technical roles, whereas female representations are intensely concentrated within a narrow field, bounded by the metaphysical and the domestic.

As shown in Table 1, the predominant mode of representing women in Greek oral tradition is through a mythical or metaphysical framework, collectively accounting for 40.7% of all female representations. This overarching category is largely driven by supernatural entities such as fairies (Neraida, 24.26%), lamias (Lamia, 2.51%), and sea nymphs (Gorgona, 0.59%). When combined with religious figures such as saints (Agia, 5.18%) and the Virgin Mary (Panagia, 3.40%), nearly half of the female presence in the collective imagination is systematically detached from physical, historical, and worldly labour.

In contrast, domestic and care-oriented roles constitute the second largest aggregate cluster at 30.5% of the female corpus. This cluster is predominantly represented by three core subcategories which make up the bulk of this percentage: housewives (Noikokyra-Syzygos, 11.39%), daughters (Kori, 9.32%), and mothers (Mana, 6.95%), with the remainder distributed among minor domestic figures. Concrete agricultural and artisan roles, such as weavers (Yfanzia, 2.37%) or female farmers (Agrotissa/Choriki, 1.78%), occupy a marginal space. Authoritative positions are overwhelmingly confined to a romanticised, non-structural elite, primarily queens and princesses (Vasilissa-Vasilopoula, 5.62%), while independent technical or public professionals such as female doctors (Giartina, 0.30%) or teachers (Daskala, 0.15%) are virtually absent.

By contrast, the mapping of male representations (Table 2) demonstrates an extensive public, institutional, and vocational presence. Although supernatural and religious roles are prominent (such as demons, gods, and saints), male characters are firmly rooted in the material world of production and governance. Agricultural and livestock labour accounts as a whole for nearly 20% of the male domain, led principally by farmers (5.99%) and shepherds (5.99%).

More significantly, men occupy dozens of highly specialised technical, public, and intellectual roles, including millers, blacksmiths, judges, sailors, and merchants, which are entirely closed to women. Notably, men are completely

absent from the domestic sphere; roles involving housework, cleaning, or active emotional caregiving are never assigned to male characters, reinforcing the strict spatial segregation of the sexes.

This striking qualitative asymmetry between the two data sets has profound ideological implications for how collective memory conceptualises the capacity for social development. Female representation is limited to a rigid, highly repetitive triad of domestic roles, constructing a woman's identity as singular, static, and biologically predetermined, while the male domain is systematically populated by a wide array of specialised trades, ranging from manual craftsmanship to intellectual and governance positions (Table 2). This structural diversification indicates that, within the symbolic framework of traditional culture, labour for men functions as an arena of individualisation, technical mastery, and institutional authority. Conversely, by denying female characters access to specialised, independent vocations, the narrative structure of the corpus systematically deprives women of the symbolic means necessary to claim economic self-sufficiency or public authority. The multiplication of male specialisations versus the narrowing of female occupations thus serves a disciplinary function: it normalises historical gender hierarchies by implying that public, structural, and multi-dimensional expertise is an inherently masculine prerogative, while female contribution must remain confined to a uniform sphere of care and non-specialised domestic necessity.

3.2 Domestic labour, invisible care, and the naturalisation of duty

A core ideological mechanism evident throughout the Politis corpus is the discursive transformation of strenuous female physical labour into an inherent, biological virtue. By stripping domestic and reproductive work of its material or structural value, the folklore text frames a woman's continuous output as a natural moral obligation rather than a tangible socio-economic contribution to the household. The domestic sphere is constructed as a closed spatial environment in which a woman's social validity is entirely subordinated to her continuous productivity at the loom, the oven, or the cradle.

The legend of "The Woman-Stone" (Gynaikopetra) from Naxos (Tradition No. 278) provides a striking example of this process. The young protagonist is depicted as the model industrious housewife, managing all household chores herself and working indoors throughout the day. The narrative explicitly emphasises her total absorption in domestic productivity, noting: "This girl wanted neither servants nor any maid, but she ran all the chores of the household with her own hands. All day long she worked inside the house. She kneaded, she prepared the oven by herself every morning, she did everything for the good of the household, casting away dirt and mess." Yet this intense moralisation of the domestic sphere functions as an ideological trap; her complete confinement to indoor labour leaves her oblivious to external, historical dangers. As the text relates, "at a moment when the sun came up and she was working inside the house in the morning, she did not know what evil would find her." When an aggressive soldier invades her workspace, the text offers her no means of active self-defence or escape. Isolated and unprotected by her community, her only

recourse to preserve her chastity and honour is a radical appeal for total objectification, praying directly to God: "My God, turn me into a stone this very moment, so that I do not fall alive into the hands of the soldier". By petrifying her into a literal landmark, the narrative permanently immobilises the ideal housewife, freezing her in the rural landscape as a perpetual monument to passive honour, silent virtue, and self-sacrificing containment. The biological duty of the woman is thus quite literally carved into the geography of collective memory, demonstrating that within this folkloric framework, a woman's ultimate social validation requires the complete erasure of her physical agency.

To expand on this domestic limitation, we encounter narratives about the structural devaluation of reproductive and care work, which is rarely recognised as active work. In various rural traditions recorded by Politis, tasks such as childcare, kneading, and bread-making are depicted as static background elements rather than specialised skills. For example, in narratives concerning midwives (Tradition No. 639), female assistance during childbirth or early infancy is considered a feminine duty, strongly moralised and framed through a prism of natural emotional inclination. The work of some women is thus embedded in ideological frameworks that disconnect it from public recognition and social rewards, rendering it structurally invisible.

Similarly, the narrative of "Perganta" from Arachova (Tradition No. 459) demonstrates how language and folk belief function as mechanisms for reinforcing women's domestic obligations through the figure of a supernatural female presence. Perganta is depicted as a household spirit or folkloric demonic being who remains wherever women are present, whether at home or engaged in agricultural work. She assists them while they comb wool, spin thread, or prepare cotton, as these activities are said to be especially pleasing to her. In this way, domestic and textile-related labour is elevated to the status of an essential female duty, both overseen and validated by a metaphysical entity. Industriousness is thus established as a primary measure of women's worth and social legitimacy: "Of hardworking women they say: 'She works day and night like Perganta'". Within this framework, women's labour is naturalised as an unquestioned and continuous obligation, acquiring the character of a silent social ritual. Any departure from this prescribed role, or any attempt to claim autonomy and enter spaces culturally coded as masculine, risks social condemnation. The woman who transgresses these expectations is readily stigmatised as idle, deviant, and deficient in relation to prevailing gender norms.

Beyond the physical degradation associated with domestic tasks, the corpus reveals a profound structural silencing of female characters within family relationships. In many narratives where the protagonist is identified as a daughter (Kori) or the male figure assumes the dominant role of father (Pateras), women are depicted as having little personal agency or narrative voice. In these texts, marriage is presented not as an autonomous emotional transition but as the culmination of a woman's socially prescribed role. The female subject is often relegated to the status of a passive object of exchange, negotiated directly between the father and the suitor (or his family) to consolidate social alliances or enhance regional prestige, as exemplified by *The Palace of the Princess* (To palati tis Vasilopoulas) from Pamphylia (Tradition No. 428). Such narrative

motifs reinforce the notion that a woman's social value is external to her subjectivity and dependent on her transfer from paternal authority to marital control. Although exceptions to this pattern occasionally appear, they remain relatively rare. In *Women's Castle* (To gynaikokastro) from Domokos (Tradition No. 142), for example, the bride is secretly in love with another man and bears his child, thereby disrupting the normative expectations governing female conduct.

3.3 The metaphysical displacements of female agency and its exceptions

The overwhelming prevalence of mythical and supernatural female entities (40.7%) reveals a deeper representational strategy: the systematic displacement of female agency from the historical world. When women display power, influence, or independent initiative in oral traditions, their capability is rarely depicted as a legitimate result of human skill, intellectual mastery, or social authority. Instead, it is transferred to the supernatural realm, where it is routinely constructed from highly negative, threatening perspectives.

Fairies (Neraides, 24.26%) and Lamias (Lamia, 2.51%) are depicted not as benevolent figures but as threatening female supernatural beings inhabiting remote and liminal spaces such as mountains, caves, and deserted riverbanks. They actively challenge community cohesion and the established social order. For example, in the tradition "The Two Fairies" (Tradition No. 716), two female entities control a valuable resource (a vineyard) and use this power to entrap, silence, or destroy male travellers who approach, with the narrative explicitly warning that whoever crosses their path is instantly "struck dumb or blinded by their supernatural wrath". By portraying autonomous female behaviour as a supernatural anomaly and a threat to communal stability, these narratives serve a regulatory function, reinforcing normative gender expectations and delineating the boundaries of socially acceptable female conduct.

Oral traditions create a rigid moral dichotomy: the "good" woman is the human housewife who works silently, invisibly, and submissively within the domestic home, while the "powerful" or autonomous woman is a monstrous, non-human entity who must be feared, avoided, or subdued by patriarchal institutions. This structural displacement strips historical women of the right to claim social power or public authority, naturalising their exclusion from institutional spheres.

3.4 Counter-narratives and subversive exceptions

However, in line with Warner's (1994) understanding of texts as sites of negotiation, the Politis corpus is not entirely monolithic. Rare but significant narrative exceptions disrupt the dominant stereotype of the submissive and invisible female worker. These alternative representations are most clearly embodied in the figure of the clever daughter (Mrs Rine; e.g. Tradition No. 164), a young woman who uses linguistic wit, intelligence, and ingenuity to overcome the challenges she faces. Such narratives create limited but important spaces for female agency within an otherwise restrictive representational framework.

In other cases, female characters are not confined to physical or domestic labour but assume roles that are practical, political, and symbolic. They actively manage public affairs and protect their families from economic or political ruin. Several local legends involving female disguise also portray women adopting male identities and taking the place of imprisoned male relatives, enabling these relatives to defend their family land (The Women of Kios, Tradition No. 19). Such narratives temporarily validate female agency and suggest that the performative boundaries of gender roles can be destabilised under exceptional circumstances. Although these subversive representations constitute only a small fraction of the 1,013 narratives examined, they demonstrate that oral traditions remain fluid symbolic spaces where hegemonic norms and subtle forms of resistance coexist, creating a complex continuum between conformity and transgression.

3.5 Structural evolution and ideological reframing in modern mass media

The ideological mechanisms by which traditional folklore renders women's work invisible or structurally subordinate are not obsolete relics of a bygone era; rather, they demonstrate a dynamic capacity to adapt, mutate, and re-emerge within contemporary mass media and digital culture. Instead of viewing oral traditions and modern media contexts as static, identical systems, it is more accurate to understand them as functionally continuous environments where deeply entrenched gender hierarchies are constantly renegotiated and modernised.

A clear historical example of this transition in the Greek context appears in classical Greek cinema, particularly from the interwar period and the postwar decade of the 1950s onwards, where delayed social modernisation and entrenched patriarchy initially promoted female depictions that were either strictly folkloric or strongly stereotypical (Komninos, 2011).

Cinematic narratives systematically reproduced spatial and professional segregation. In the post-war years, commercial cinema overwhelmingly confined women to domestic roles, projecting the image of the wealthy, mischievous girl whose main narrative purpose was not to pursue a career but to find a suitable husband (Komninos, 2011). Even when subversive characters appeared, such as Michael Cacoyannis' *Stella* (1955), their refusal to conform to petit bourgeois domestic life met with strong reactions from contemporary critics, demonstrating systemic resistance to female autonomy (Komninos, 2011). Where women's work was explicitly depicted, it was often relegated to secondary, supporting, or traditional occupations, such as the island seamstress in Pantelis Voulgaris's *Brides* (2003), where a woman's professional identity remained structurally entangled with patriarchal transactions, such as becoming a mail-order bride (Komninos, 2011). In contrast, dominant narratives systematically reinforced male public power and institutional leadership.

In contemporary television, advertising, and digital media, this binary logic is subtly reshaped but remains structurally intact (Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008). Studies have shown that the contemporary audiovisual landscape continues to reproduce deep horizontal and vertical divisions, confining female

characters to specific low-status professional sectors, while maintaining institutional power and decision-making roles for men (Tsangaris & Pazarzi, 2016). This systematic distortion creates a sharp divergence between empirical reality and media codes.

Cinematic narratives, contemporary advertisements, and social media channels often project the image of the “emancipated” or “empowered” woman, but critical analysis reveals this is a form of pseudo-empowerment and commodification (Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008; Tsangaris & Pazarzi, 2016; Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2019). Rather than addressing structural inequalities, media networks promote an idealised image of women who are expected to succeed professionally while also fulfilling all domestic caregiving roles.

As contemporary Greek female directors have emphasised since the 2000s, in films such as Katerina Evangelakou’s *Think It Over* (2004) or Olga Malea’s *Risotto* (2000), the modern narrative expects women to enter the public workplace while simultaneously struggling with the conflicting, double burden of professional demands and traditional expectations for family and personal happiness (Komninos, 2011). Her value remains tied to her aesthetic appeal and her ability to manage this double burden without requiring structural change.

Crucially, this demand for self-management is further intensified and transformed in the era of social media, introducing a qualitative shift that complicates the traditional framework for examining female representations in relation to media labour. As Akritidou, Megaris, and Georgaca (2024) observe, the female presence on social networking sites demands continuous, internalised “management”, a form of digital self-labour, in which the woman simultaneously functions as creator, inspector, and object to be consumed. Operating within a fine spectrum between personal liberation and social conformity, this phenomenon marks a new era in the formation of the female image in relation to labour, shifting the focus from the mere representation of work to the work of representation itself.

Therefore, while the technical medium has fundamentally shifted, an underlying functional continuity persists. Whether through the traditional tale of the submissive shepherdess told by a village elder or the elaborate lifestyle conveyed by a modern digital influencer, women’s work continues to be reframed as an innate moral duty, a natural inclination, or an aesthetic achievement, systematically concealing its character as a socially necessary, autonomous, and structurally valuable activity.

4. Conclusions

The systematic exploration of Nikolaos G. Politis’s *Traditions of the Greek People* through a feminist and discourse-oriented lens reveals the deep historical and cultural structures that regulate the representation of gendered labour. By analysing the structural distribution across all 1,013 texts, this study exposes a profound qualitative and quantitative polarisation in the collective imagination. The male domain is marked by semantic expansion, populated by a range of specialised, independent, and authoritative public trades, while the female domain is subjected to a dual strategy of domestic confinement and metaphysical

displacement. Domestic tasks, essential for subsistence and social reproduction, are stripped of their character as active work and reframed as intrinsic biological virtues or silent rituals of moral duty, as crystallised in the literal and figurative immobilisation found in narratives such as "The Woman-Stone" or "Perganta." Simultaneously, when female power or autonomy threatens to emerge, it is systematically exiled to the margins of the historical world, displaced onto threatening supernatural entities like Fairies and Lamias.

However, as this research emphasises, the folklore archive is not a wholly monolithic apparatus of patriarchal containment. The presence of subversive exceptions, such as the linguistic wit of the clever daughter or the performative destabilisation of gender boundaries through female disguise, demonstrates that popular traditions remain fluid symbolic spaces. These counter-narratives create vital fissures within the hegemonic structure, where compliance and resistance constantly coexist. By examining these complex dynamics, this study highlights how specific historical and cultural conditions fix, stabilise, and discipline gender roles to meet the productive demands of a given socio-historical context.

The vital contribution of this study lies in establishing a comparative heuristic framework that links these historical structures to contemporary media systems. By treating oral folklore and modern media contexts not as identical environments but as functionally continuous cultural channels, this article underscores that the historical devaluation of women's work is not an obsolete relic of an agrarian past. Instead, it forms the foundational cultural matrix upon which modern media representations are built. Whether through post-war cinematic narratives that confined women to marital transactions, contemporary advertisements promoting a commodified "pseudo-empowerment" under the dual burden of professional and domestic performance, or digital platforms demanding continuous self-labour, the underlying ideological mechanism remains remarkably unchanged. Work is consistently converted into an aesthetic achievement, an emotional inclination, or an innate duty, thereby concealing its socio-economic value.

Ultimately, these findings open new avenues for future interdisciplinary research. This study demonstrates that genuine representation is closely linked to how real physical labour is valued; therefore, contemporary struggles for gender equality cannot rely solely on superficial images of "empowered" women in public life. Future folklore and media studies should look beyond simple statistics and content counts. Instead, researchers should examine how traditional storytelling patterns are being reused, either as tools of control or as forms of resistance, within emerging digital algorithms and AI technology. To truly transform cultural narratives, it is necessary to expose these deeply embedded, generational codes. By doing so, the historical archive can be transformed from a tool that merely repeats past inequalities into a powerful resource for rewriting contemporary social meanings.

5. Data Appendix : Quantitative Structural Tables

Table 1. Distribution of Female Representations in the Politis Corpus (N = 1,013)

Character Type / Representational Category	Percentage (%)
Fairy (<i>Neraida</i> - Mythical Entity)	24.26
Housewife-Wife (<i>Noikokyra-Syzygos</i>)	11.39
Daughter (<i>Kori</i>)	9.32
Mother (<i>Mana</i>)	6.95
Queen / Princess (<i>Vasilissa-Vasilopoula</i>)	5.62
Saint (<i>Agia</i> - Religious Figure)	5.18
Old Woman (<i>Gria</i>)	4.73
Other Mythical / Metaphysical Beings	4.73
Virgin Mary (<i>Panagia</i>)	3.4
Lamia (<i>Lamia</i>)	2.51
Weaver (<i>Yfanzia</i>)	2.37
Severe Illnesses in Female Form (Metaphysical)	2.22
Female Farmer / Peasant (<i>Agrotissa/Choriki</i>)	1.78
Midwife (<i>Mami</i>)	1.63
Shepherdess (<i>Voskopoula</i>)	1.63
Witch (<i>Magissa</i>)	1.63
Strigla (<i>Strigla</i>)	1.63
Woman Grinding at the Mill	1.48
Washerwoman (<i>Plistra</i>)	1.33
Water-Carrier (<i>Neroulou</i>)	1.00
Priest's Wife (<i>Papadia</i>)	0.89
Noblewoman / Aristocrat (<i>Archontissa</i>)	0.74
Nun (<i>Kalogria</i>)	0.74
Mermaid (<i>Gorgona</i>)	0.59
Dancer (<i>Choreftria</i>)	0.3
Female Traditional Healer / Doctor (<i>Giartina</i>)	0.3
Woman Carrying Wood from Forest	0.3
Slave (<i>Sklava</i>)	0.15
Cook (<i>Mageirissa</i>)	0.15
Urban Woman (<i>Asti</i>)	0.15
Nanny (<i>Ntanta</i>)	0.15
Captain's Wife / Female Captain (<i>Kapetanissa</i>)	0.15
Teacher (<i>Daskala</i>)	0.15
Female Carpenter (<i>Xylourgina</i>)	0.15
Female Master-BUILDER (<i>Mastorissa</i>)	0.15

Mourner (<i>Moirologistra</i>)	0.15
TOTAL	100

Table 2. Distribution of Male Representations in the Politis Corpus (N = 1,013)

Character Type / Representational Category	Percentage (%)
Demon / Devil (<i>Daimonas/Diavolos</i>)	7.02
Deity / Saint (<i>Theotita/Agios</i>)	6.71
Kallikantzaros (Mythical Entity)	6.2
God (<i>Theos</i>)	6.2
Farmer / Peasant (<i>Agrotis/Chorikos</i>)	5.99
Priest (<i>Papas/Iereas</i>)	5.89
Shepherd (<i>Tsopanis/Ktinotrofos</i>)	5.89
Other Mythical / Metaphysical Beings	5.68
Vampire / Werewolf (<i>Vrikolakas/Lykanthropos</i>)	4.44
King (<i>Vasilias</i>)	3.62
Brave Youth (<i>Palikari</i>)	3.62
Christ (<i>Christos</i>)	3.1
Soldier / Warrior (<i>Stratiotis/Polemistis</i>)	2.89
Husband (<i>Syzygos</i>)	2.79
Son (<i>Gios</i>)	2.79
Sailor / Mariner (<i>Naftis/Naftikos</i>)	2.27
Old Man (<i>Geros</i>)	2.27
Father (<i>Pateras</i>)	1.76
Noble / Aristocrat (<i>Archontas</i>)	1.65
Miller (<i>Mylonas</i>)	1.45
Monk (<i>Kalogeros</i>)	1.24
Master Craftsman (<i>Mastoras</i>)	1.14
Outlaw / Bandit / Thief (<i>Listis/Kleftis</i>)	1.14
Doctor (<i>Giatros</i>)	0.72
Hunter (<i>Kynigos</i>)	0.72
Pasha (<i>Passas</i>)	0.72
Fisherman (<i>Psaras</i>)	0.72
Labourer (<i>Ergatis</i>)	0.62
Captain (<i>Kapetanios</i>)	0.52
Sorcerer / Wizard (<i>Magos</i>)	0.52
Male Fairy (<i>Neraidos</i>)	0.52
Musician (<i>Mousikos</i>)	0.52
Forest Ranger / Field Guard (<i>Dasofylakas</i>)	0.52
Shoemaker (<i>Tsagkaris</i>)	0.46
Carrier / Carter (<i>Metaforeas/Agogiatis</i>)	0.41
Merchant / Trader (<i>Emporos</i>)	0.41
Officer (<i>Axiomatikos</i>)	0.41
Poor Man (<i>Ftochos</i>)	0.41

Traveler (<i>Taxidiotis</i>)	0.41
Urban Citizen (<i>Astos</i>)	0.31
Woodcutter (<i>Xylokopos</i>)	0.31
Baker (<i>Fournaris</i>)	0.31
Slave (<i>Sklavos</i>)	0.31
Philosopher (<i>Filosofos</i>)	0.21
Tailor (<i>Raftis</i>)	0.21
Madman / Fool (<i>Trellos</i>)	0.21
Civil Engineer (<i>Politikos Michanikos</i>)	0.21
Grocer (<i>Bampalis</i>)	0.21
Boatman / Ferryman (<i>Varkaris</i>)	0.21
Governor / Ruler (<i>Kyvernitis</i>)	0.21
Monster Hunter / Spirit Expeller (<i>Zoudiaris</i>)	0.21
Sponge Diver (<i>Sfoungaras</i>)	0.21
Teacher (<i>Daskalos</i>)	0.21
Usurer / Moneylender (<i>Tokoglyfos</i>)	0.1
Carpenter (<i>Maragos</i>)	0.1
Shipwright (<i>Kalafatis/Nafpigos</i>)	0.1
Grave-digger (<i>Nekrothafis</i>)	0.1
Saddler (<i>Samaras</i>)	0.1
Cafe Owner (<i>Kafetzis</i>)	0.1
Ascetic / Hermit (<i>Askitis</i>)	0.1
Mayor (<i>Dimarchos</i>)	0.1
Convict / Prisoner (<i>Katadikos</i>)	0.1
Gendarmerie Sergeant (<i>Yponomatarchis</i>)	0.1
Pirate (<i>Peiratis</i>)	0.1
Bailiff / Court Clerk (<i>Klitiras</i>)	0.1
Patriarch (<i>Patriarchis</i>)	0.1
Singer (<i>Tragoudistis</i>)	0.1
Oil-Press Worker (<i>Elaiotryftis</i>)	0.1
Lawyer (<i>Dikigoros</i>)	0.1
Scribe / Clerk (<i>Grafias</i>)	0.1
Gendarme / Policeman (<i>Chorofylakas</i>)	0.1
Consul (<i>Proxenos</i>)	0.1
Collector / Tax Gatherer (<i>Eispraktoras</i>)	0.1
Man Grinding at the Mill	0.1
Man Fetching Water	0.1
Church Sexton (<i>Kantilanaftis</i>)	0.1
TOTAL	100

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