

On Having Given Her the Voice in the Penelopiad Re Visiting the Myth of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey

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Abstract

The Penelopiad is a novella by Margaret Atwood. It was published in 2005 as part of the first set of books in the 'Canongate Myth Series' where contemporary authors rewrite the ancient myths. The book was translated in to 28 languages and released simultaneously around the world by 33 publishers. For Atwood, such ancient myths can still tell us living truths. "They function", she argues, as "a big map of the psyche, they are a big map of the human-ness of human beings and they layout in the various bits of themselves the full range of human desires and fears - which are in fact what drive the world. It certainly isn't reason or logic. It is desire and fear and that's true of even the most supposedly real of things: the stock market". This paper intends to bring out the story of Penelope from her point of view as Atwood gives her voice to speak out which was not given in the original classic myth, Homer's Odyssey, as it was narrated from the perspective of the male author. In this novella it can be seen how Atwood makes Penelope to speak her heart out to emphasize the plight and agony of women which had been suppressed for centuries together in the name of patriarchy.

Keywords: Myth, classic, patriarchy, oppression, re-telling, plight, anguish, female perspective..

The Penelopiad (2005) is Atwood's Twelfth book, a very significant multi-faceted literary personality from Canada. It is a novella, re-telling of a classic myth of her choice, i.e. the myth of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey. It retells Homer's "Odyssey" from the perspective of Penelope, Odysseus's wife. In this narrative Penelope reminisces on the events during the Odyssey, life in Hades, Odysseus, Helen and her relationships with her parents. A chorus of the twelve maids, whom Odysseus believed were disloyal and whom Telemachus hanged, interrupt Penelope's narrative to express their view on the events. The novella's central themes include the effects of story-telling, double standards between the sexes and the classes and the fairness of justice.

The stories told in the Odyssey by Nestor and Menelaus to Telemachus, and Odysseus to a Scherian court make Odysseus into a hero as he fights monsters and seduces goddesses. Homer's Odyssey is about the return of King Odysseus from Trojan War, to his Kingdom Ithaca after twenty long years. He is known to have spent ten years fighting war on behalf of Helen's husband King Menelaus to bring Helen back from Troy. For the remaining ten years he is believed to have been lost and wandering in the Aegean Sea, "trying to get home, enduring hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses" (The Penelopiad XIX). His wife Penelope, King Icarius's daughter and Helene's cousin, has been famous for her unflinching fidelity being; "quintessential faithful wife, and known for her, intelligence and constancy"

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According to Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus was a liar who drunkenly fought a one-eyed bartender then boasted it was a giant cannibalistic cyclops. Homer portrays Penelope as loyal, patient, and the ideal wife, as he contrasts her to Clytemnestra who killed Agamemnon upon his return from Troy. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope feels compelled to tell her story because she is dissatisfied with Homer's portrayal of her and the other myths about her sleeping with the suitors and giving birth to Pan. She rejects the role of the ideal wife and admits she was just trying to survive. The *Odyssey* makes the maids into traitors who consort with the suitors. From the maids' perspective, they were innocent victims, used by Penelope to spy, raped and abused by the suitors, and then murdered by Odysseus and Telemachus. Margaret Atwood shows the truth occupies a third position between the myths and biased points of view.

Penelope tells her version of the classic myth of her life and marriage to Odysseus in *The Penelopiad*. From Penelope's point of view, expressed in the first person, the novella primarily focuses on the themes of the effects of story-telling perspectives, the double-standard between the sexes and socioeconomic classes. Now living in Hades, Penelope reminisces about what took place during *The Odyssey*, and her relationships with Odysseus, Helen, who was her cousin and her parents. Throughout the narrative, Penelope's wry, intelligent voice highlights her rather powerless life, and her determination to make the very best of it that she could. Penelope's father was King Icarius, of Sparta, and her mother a Naiad or water-nymph. Her father, according to a prophecy, tried to drown her as a child, but when she survived, he became overly affectionate. Her mother was beautiful, but distant and neglectful. She was given in marriage at the age of fifteen to the man who won a contest held for that purpose. Odysseus was a clod-hopper, a countrified bumpkin, from a low-class rock outcropping called Ithaca, with a barrel chest and great self-confidence. He also rigged the contest so that he would win.

Penelope fell in love with Odysseus, but she took great care not to outshine him, knowing that he took great pride in his own cleverness and his abilities to outwit others. Shortly after Telemachus was born, Odysseus was called away to the Trojan war to defend Helen's honour, leaving Penelope to run Ithaca and raise Telemachus on her own. She blamed Helen for ruining her life. Occasionally, news would come from the war in Troy and then of Odysseus's journey back home; however, as the years passed, and it became more unlikely that Odysseus would ever come home, suitors began to show up at the palace. Eventually many of them had gathered.

Taking elements from the ancient Greek tragedies, a chorus of twelve maids interrupt Penelope's narrative to give their opinion on events. Penelope's maids, they were hung by Telemachus, Penelope's son, because Odysseus believed they were disloyal. From Hades, they introduce their viewpoints through different genres, such as a lament, a Jump-rope rhyme, an idyll, a ballad, a lecture, a court trial and various songs. These women, all slaves, proclaim their nonexistent childhoods, the brutal unfairness of their lives, their dreams of being princesses, and their unwarranted deaths as traitors, which Penelope did not try to prevent. These women haunt Penelope and Odysseus in Hades. Of course, Penelope weaves a shroud for Laertes,

her father-in-law, telling her suitors that she will choose a new husband from among them when the shroud is finished. However, this is a trick, for she spends her nights unweaving all that she wove during the day, with her maid's help. Twenty years after his departure, Penelope watches Odysseus return disguised as a beggar. She sets up a meeting with the beggar, whom she knows to be Odysseus, and devises a contest for the suitors with his approval, for them to set up twelve axes and take Odysseus great bow, and whomever could shoot an arrow through the axe heads would win Penelope's hand, she knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this deed. Unbeknownst to her, however, her maids had insulted Odysseus all during the day, believing his disguise as a beggar and continuing Penelope's orders that they act as rebelliously as possible to spy amongst the suitors in their pursuit of information for her. Nevertheless, they paid for their insults with their lives.

Odysseus kills the suitors and Telemachus hangs Penelope's favorites, the twelve maids. Odysseus reveals himself to Penelope, and she pretends to not have Penelope's intelligent but casual and even naive tone throughout the narrative, establishes that she took control of what she could control in her life, though the reader can see, from a modern perspective, just how few issues over which she had control. In turn, Penelope's admissions of what she could not accomplish reinforce Atwood's theme in the retelling of a powerful woman's story; she did what she could within the confines of her time and circumstances, which were extremely limited. In particular, she could never ever her own husband, know how intelligent she was and how much of his bragging, lies, and storytelling she saw through.

Atwood uses humour, pathos and a significant dose of imagination and creativity to tell the story of Penelope and the twelve maids. It is an innovative piece of the chorus. The chorus of the Maids interjects quite frequently during Penelope's soliloquy to share their perspective of Penelope, Odysseus, and the on-going events in the palace on Ithica. Some of these choral interludes include bits of funny poetic doggerel, a lyrical and well-written lamentation, a folk song, an idyll, a sea shanty, a ballad, a drama, an anthropology lecture, a court trial, and a love song. Each of these choral interludes works very well in bringing to life these twelve, largely unknown, maids.

Atwood has written that all writers must move from "now" to "once upon a time", and all "must descend to where the stories are kept "but" must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny or else of reclamation". The Penelopiad shows Atwood making off with an especially well-guarded cultural treasure - making it new, as she always does. Like every wise heroine of myth, however, she won't tempt fate or push her luck. "May be I'll never do anything again. Who can tell?" she frets. Atwood's Penelopiad has its pinter - like side, the fraught court of Ithaca, its wily king absent, heavy with secrets and silences and lies. And it has its wild struggle for survival, too. Penelope, the woman alone, learns to cope with the desertion of the alpha-male hunter-warriors for Troy and then for their Cross-Mediterranean escapades with seductive sirens and scary giants. Meanwhile, the pesky suitors - 100 or more - gather to violate her maids, to eat her out of goats and pigs and to pressure her in to an enslaving match.

So, Atwood, as usual, has set herself a thorny formal task: take this mythical dutiful doormat and make her fly "what's to say about someone who's merely good?" she asks rhetorically. "It was the Victorian idea that a lady should never get her name in to the paper, except for three times in her life born, married, died. Other than that, you stayed out of public view and concerned yourself with the healthy home. So that was the fate of Penelope. But, as she says in the first chapter, I don't approve of this version. There's more to it, and to me".

The famous critic Derrida states in his book of Grammatology "the desire for the origin becomes an

indispensable and indestructible function situated within a syntax without origin... it is unthinkable and intolerable that what has the name origin should be no more than a point situated within the system of supplementary” (243). Logos is the origin and the organizing principle of western metaphysics and the paradigms it has constructed. The categories it has offered and the binary oppositions which are also the working mechanisms of language, man is born into have created hierarchies that privilege one leg over the other. Logocentrism, as Derrida notes, has kept looking for a centre and whether it is the origin (arche) or the end (telos), it organizes other paradigms around itself; the centre categorizes, freezes, fixes. The myths and archetypes in the traditional discourse reinforce these categories, usually inexplicitly, by validating their de facto position with the messages they convey. They serve to sharpen the boundaries between good and bad, men and women, immortal and mortal, human and beast, always carrying a message, either a warning or advice to the listeners. They consolidate the totalizing discourses and the notions that work in it by repeating or justifying figures such as the strong, brave, nationalist hero image in opposition to the beautiful, virtuous, submissive mother-wife figure, or the evil, jealous, witchy, alluring goddess figure. Either regarded as a reflection of a common past or as a way of controlling the society, myths have helped to establish certain notions and dichotomies which define our world.

Margaret Atwood is at her best in exposing her mythical consciousness in delineating the position of women who have been silenced for centuries together. She gives voice to Penelope to express her deep felt agony and suffering in an authentic manner. She wants to let all men know the inner feelings felt by a woman, from a woman’s point of view by re-writing the myth. She proves herself as a writer endowed with the consciousness of myth and the consciousness about the predicament of women as well. Her re-telling of the myth of the construction of Penelope and de-constructing it is certainly a great attempt to create an awareness among women that their identities are always artificially constructed. Atwood’s excavation and adaptation of the ancient myth of Penelope results in a highly experimental text in which she not only “liberates the epic story from its generic constraints”, but also liberates Penelope and her twelve maids from “the limitations imposed on them by the traditional narratives” (Steals). Thus Penelope deconstructs the gender stereotypes, boundaries and spaces through her narrative of the novella. She surpasses and transcends the passive, submissive, silent stereotype of the feminine identity.

Atwood challenges the traditional patriarchal narrative of the "Odyssey" by giving voice to Penelope's experiences and emotions thus making the novella a feminist representation. She also portrays the power dynamics as the novella explores the power struggles between Penelope and the suitors, as well as her complex relationship with Odysseus. Identity and Agency is also one of the concerns of the author and thus Penelope's narrative raises questions about her own identity, agency, and autonomy in a patriarchal society. Besides, the novella highlights the importance of memory and storytelling in shaping our understanding of the past.

The merit of the novella lies in its style and structure as it uses **non-linear narrative**-the story is presented in a non-linear fashion, with Penelope's narrative jumping back and forth in time and **multiple narrative voices**- the novella features multiple narrative voices, including Penelope's, the suitors', and the maids'. There is also **intertextuality**-Atwood engages in a dialogue with Homer's "Odyssey", challenging and subverting the original narrative.

Local geography and climate may change the scenery of myth, as Atwood says “The ice monsters of the north would not have appeared in the Amazon forests. But the basic stuff - love, hate, death, life, famine, plenty, animal helpers, the fates of souls, creation myths, what will happen at the end of the world - those

are all fixtures. You could add that language and narrative are the most important human inventions. And once you've got a language with a past tense and a future tense you're going to have a mythology".

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