

## Politics of Retellings: Subversion of Traditional Ideals of Greek Myths in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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### Abstract

Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is approached as a radical reconsideration of mythology in the present study and is cross-sectionally examined through the integrated lens of Feminism, Marxism, and Postmodernism. Employs a close textual analysis, the problem is defined in terms of examining the ways Atwood in her 2005 retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* disrupts orthodox approaches to narrative construction, empowers silenced voices, contests patriarchal imposition, and sheds light on intersectional and class-based oppressions. The study focuses on Atwood's portrayal of silenced figures, the narrative justice offered to the twelve hanged maids, and the postmodern use of polyphonic storytelling and genre blending. The study's results illustrate that not only does Atwood's *Penelopiad* grant Penelope and the maids a voice, but also, idealized mythic archetypes are subverted as their flaws and complexities are revealed. The interludes of the maids' chorus emphasize class stratum exploitation and class solidarity. The original epic's dominance is contested by Atwood's innovative form and metafictional aspects of the novel as the retelling demonstrates the ways mythic narratives can function as literary and cultural criticism. This study shows the engaging intersections of the three frameworks.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, Feminist Revisionism, Greek Mythology, Intersectionality, Polyphonic Narrative, Mythic Retelling, Postmodern Literature.

### Introduction:

“All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them” (Margaret Atwood).

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian author, poet, and literary critic, was born on November 18, 1939. She has released 18 novels, 18 poetry volumes, 11 nonfiction books, 9 short fiction collections, 8 children's books, 2 graphic novels, and other small press editions of fiction and poetry since 1961. *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel published in 1985, is her most well-known work. Gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language,

climate change, and "power politics" are just a few of the topics that Atwood explores in her novels. Her early interest in mythology and fairy tales served as the inspiration for many of her writings. The independent Scottish publisher Canongate Books created a series of books called the Canongate Myth Series, which reimagines and rewrites old tales from different cultures. The first three books in the series were released on October 21, 2005.

Margaret Atwood wrote a novel titled *The Penelopiad*. It was included in the first volume of the Canongate Myth Series when it was released in 2005. In *The Penelopiad*, the protagonist, Penelope recalls the *Odyssey's* events, life in Hades, Odysseus, Helen of Troy, and her parent-child connections. In order to voice their opinions, a Greek chorus of the twelve maids, whom Odysseus thought was unfaithful and whom Telemachus hanged, interrupts Penelope's story. Every time, a different genre is used in the maids' interludes, such as a jump-rope rhyme, a lament, an idyll, a ballad, a lecture, a court trial, and many song styles.

Greek myths are foundational narratives from ancient Greece, originally passed down through oral tradition and later recorded in epic poetry and drama. These stories, which include the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* attributed to Homer, were central to Greek cultural identity and provided explanations for the origins of the world, the actions of gods and heroes, and the values of Greek society. Over time, epic poems like the *Odyssey* came to focus on the "age of heroes;" thus, they highlighted human accomplishments and moral dilemmas rather than solely divine intervention.

Greek myths played a vital role in shaping ancient Greek values, worldview and identities. Myths were not just tales; they were the very foundation upon which humans understood their world. They gave an explanation for the way things work, the way people behave, and the way we do things, which gave meaning to a seemingly chaotic universe. Myths also transmitted values through the actions of gods and heroes. Myths modelled virtues such as courage, loyalty and hospitality setting standards for individual and communal conduct. Shared myths also made it possible for the creation of a unified society by creating a common cultural and religious framework, fostering a collective identity among the diverse city-states of Greece. Women in Greek myth and epics occupy complex roles that are often paradoxical. While the tradition is dominated by male-authored perspectives and male heroes, women are frequently pivotal to the plot and symbolic meaning of these stories. There are certain archetypes that Greek myths often use to portray their female characters. Penelope is the quintessential example of 'The Faithful Wife'. She is celebrated for her chastity, patience and cleverness. Her virtue is contrasted with 'The Dangerous Woman' allure of other women in the *Odyssey* like Helen, Circe and Calypso who represent temptation, chaos or the unknown. They embody the potential for female agency to disrupt social order often portrayed as threats to patriarchal stability. Despite these limiting archetypes, women in epics often display remarkable intelligence, resourcefulness and agency.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope is portrayed as the faithful wife of Odysseus, king of Ithaca. While Odysseus is away for twenty years, first fighting in the Trojan War, then struggling to return home, Penelope remains in Ithaca, raising their son Telemachus and fending off over a hundred persistent suitors who seek her hand and Odysseus' throne. Penelope's intelligence and loyalty are central to her characterization: she devises clever strategies to delay remarriage, most famously weaving and secretly unweaving a funeral shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes, telling the suitors she will choose a husband when the shroud is finished. Each night, she undoes her day's work, maintaining hope for Odysseus' return.

Penelope's relationships centred on her identity as a wife, mother, and queen. She is appreciated for her loyalty and intelligence, which are similar attributes to those of Odysseus, as his intelligence is a notable trait in Homer's epics. The way in which Penelope deals with

the suitors is characterised by politeness and restraint, although it has been argued that she might have enjoyed or skillfully managed the situation in the absence of Odysseus. The relationship between Penelope and Odysseus is characterised by respect and longing, although it is also characterised by the difficulties of their long-distance relationship.

Penelope's character has fascinated people over the ages, giving rise to different interpretations of her life, desires, and importance. There are countless tales, literary works, and novels that refer to or are based on Penelope's life. She is often used to define the concept of marital loyalty. Later, literary works have focused on the complexities of Penelope's life, her possible enjoyment of power in the absence of her husband, her emotional state, and her ability to deceive. These complexities provide a rich case study in terms of literary or psychological analysis.

Feminist writers have revisited the life of Penelope to highlight her empowerment, strength, and cleverness. Instead of a victim, Penelope is portrayed as a symbol of feminine empowerment in a patriarchal society. These works, such as *The Penelopiad*, are told from the points of view of the characters in Homer's *Odyssey* but are told from their perspective. These works are a way to reinterpret the moral lessons of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Greek myths have been used to define milestones in society over a very long period, giving rise to different ideals, opinions, and arguments about what is moral, what is feminine, what is masculine, and what is powerful. Penelope is a part of this tradition, being a figure who is both defined by her society and subverts her society in a subtle way. It is this duality, along with her ability to transcend her roles that ensures her place in literature and feminist reinterpretation.

### **Analysing *The Penelopiad*:**

In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood employs a subversion of conventional concepts of Greek myth through the integrated approaches of Feminism, Marxism, and Postmodernism. Atwood's work of revisionist literature goes beyond the boundaries of mere retelling, becoming a radical intervention in patriarchal literary traditions, class exploitation, and mythic archetypes through innovative narrative styles. *The Penelopiad* presents a multi-faceted critique of intersecting systems of gender, class, and narrative.

Atwood's work can be seen as a 'heterotopia', a space that is "outside of all places" (Foucault), a place where marginalised voices can speak and create an alternate vision of justice and truth. By employing a polyphonic narrative strategy, genre hybridity, and deconstruction of characters, Atwood's work is a celebration as much as a subversion of classical literature. *The Penelopiad* is a quintessential example of a work of feminist revisionism, an example of "re-vision" as an act of survival and resistance against androcentric literary traditions. Adrienne Rich, in her seminal essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," explains revisionism as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). For Rich, it is "an act of survival" (18), an act by women to reclaim their agency and fight against patriarchal literature.

Atwood's portrayal of Penelope and the twelve maids empowers them to speak their lost stories. The most revolutionary move Atwood makes is in changing the narrative structure from the third-person omniscient narrative used in Homer's epic to a first-person narrative written after death, which gives unprecedented power to marginalised characters. The statement of intent of Penelope to tell her own story, "I'll spin a thread of my own" (Atwood 3), can be taken literally as a statement of intent to tell a story, but also metaphorically as a statement of intent of female authorship. The statement of intent of Penelope to tell her own story brings a fundamental shift in narrative interpretation from the

male narrator to the female subject; it undermines the concept of textual authority, as shown in the fact that all stories are constructed, partial, and subject to revision. The underworld serves as a space of liberation, where earthly rules of patriarchal decorum are not applicable, allowing Penelope to speak of her marriage as a transactional relationship and Odysseus's heroics as lies.

The maids raise their voices in a collective chorus, and the power of storytelling is stretched to its limit. The genre-bending performances of the maids, which include ballads, courtroom dramas, jump rope rhymes, and even lectures on anthropology, become an *écriture féminine*, a feminine way of writing that subverts the traditional masculine way of writing by means of collective storytelling (Mambrol). Each genre brings out a different aspect of the maids' lives, and the ballads connect them to a common memory, the courtroom dramas portray them as prosecutors, and the jumping rhythm rhymes propel them back into a lost innocence.

This polyphonic form is the embodiment of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic discourse, in which a number of voices exist simultaneously without any kind of hierarchical subordination. Unlike Homer's narrative authority, *The Penelopiad* has created a "carnavalesque" that "suspend ideas and power structures" (Raine), in a humorous, chaotic, and laughter-filled manner. In *The Penelopiad*, the testimony of the maids in their lament is a direct challenge to the complete erasure of the maids in the original myth.

This polyphonic narrative form is a challenge to what Jean- François Lyotard called "grand narratives," or overarching narratives that attempt to claim a kind of universal truth (*Jean François Lyotard (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*). By breaking the narrative into multiple voices, which at times contradict each other, Atwood challenges the notion of any single voice or narrative having dominance or superiority. This is a post-modern notion and is in line with Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, whereby meaning is created by "a mosaic of quotations from other texts" (37), or a combination of multiple textual fragments.

These genre-bending techniques prove to be especially potent means of subversion of the epic genre. Atwood's use of folk genres such as sea shanties, jump rope rhymes, and ballads brings in what Bakhtin called 'carnavalesque' elements that subvert social order through humor and irreverence (Raine). These genres democratize the narrative as they favor the oral traditions of marginalized groups over the literary traditions of the elite as represented in the genre of classical epics.

The metafictional elements of the novel subvert the dominant genre as they expose the fictionality of all stories. Penelope's statement that she would write the story on her own, "it's my turn to do a little story-making" (Atwood 3), challenges the idea of the power of storytelling in general, as well as her own story. This is similar to Roland Barthes' idea of the "writerly text" (Mambrol, "Roland Barthes' Concept of Readerly and Writerly Texts"), which resists passive consumption and places the burden of meaning-making on the reader rather than the author.

Modern anachronisms such as "light bulbs" (Atwood 6) and "film stars" (Atwood 43) in an ancient setting are yet again used to subvert temporal and cultural borders. They link misogynistic tales of ancient times to contemporary gender politics, implying that mythological tales are not holy scripts but contemporary tales of injustice in society. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood subverts the idealized image of characters by revealing their flaws. Atwood subverts the archetypes of binary oppositions in classical mythology, replacing them with multidimensional characters that are more realistic.

Penelope's transformation is the greatest departure from mythological ideals. Rather than being the loyal wife of Homer's epic, Atwood's Penelope is a cunning, jealous, manipulative wife whose 'loyalty' to Ulysses is a pragmatic decision, not a matter of choice

or loyalty. Her admission of leading the Suitors on a wild goose chase and promising some of them privately, in a matter of course, subverts her legendary loyalty to her husband. This admission is in line with Judith Butler's argument on gender performativity, in which an individual's identity is created through 'performing' a gender, "either conforming to an expected gender identity or contesting that expectation in way" (Ton 9).

The complexity of Penelope's character has a number of critical implications. Her jealousy towards Helen, for example, exposes the misogyny that patriarchal societies instigate in women. Penelope's treatment of the maids, on the other hand, exposes the role of class privilege in helping women survive patriarchal oppression by turning their aggression towards others. Penelope's characterization, therefore, challenges the virgin/whore duality that is common in classical mythology and provides a new perspective on female identity.

Odysseus, on the other hand, is also subject to a similar deconstruction. His characterization by Atwood strips him of the glory that is accorded to him in classical mythology and reveals him to be a "cheat and thief (Atwood 9)," whose stories of adventure and bravery are nothing but lies meant to cover up his opportunism. Such a deconstruction of classical characters has a number of implications for feminism. It exposes the patriarchal lie of heroic characters and the immorality of violence that is celebrated in classical mythology.

Helen's characterization, on the other hand, exposes the role of patriarchal societies in reducing women to objects of beauty. Helen's transformation from a beautiful woman to a "septic bitch" (31), is a critique of patriarchal societies and their role in reducing women to objects of beauty. Such a critique is, on the other hand, linked to the role of the male gaze, but it is also a critique of the role of women in competing for male attention and thereby alienating each other. The role of the maids, on the other hand, exposes the role of class in oppressing women. The novel exposes the intersection of class and gender oppression. The maids' chorus, for example, exposes the role of capitalism in oppressing women. It exposes the role of capitalism in treating enslaved women as objects whose value is solely based on their capacity to work.

The maids' execution is an example of property defence, where Odysseus' heroic return necessitates the elimination of witnesses to his wife's strategic deceptions. The violence is an example of capitalist logic, which is connected to Silvia Federici's work on how domestic work subsidises global economic systems through unpaid reproductive work ("Silvia Federici, 'The Reproduction of Labour-power in the Global Economy, Marxist Theory and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution'"). The maids' various forms of work, including domestic work, sexual work, and emotional work, are for patriarchal and imperial interests, maintaining household infrastructure for Odysseus' participation in the colonial project of Troy.

The maids' enforced involvement in Penelope's intelligence-gathering operation is a paradigmatic example of the double bind, which, according to the theory of intersectionality, is a common phenomenon among multiple marginalized groups. Penelope's advice, "You must pretend to be in love with these men... It's one way of serving your master" (Atwood 28), reduces the maids' bodies to a mere tactical device and, at the same time, establishes the grounds for the maids' ultimate persecution. This is a typical example of the ways in which the sexuality of enslaved black women is at once demanded and vilified, a phenomenon common in the history of racialized sexuality. The maids' joint narrative is a paradigmatic example of a narrative of intergenerational trauma, representing the voices that the dominant history has systematically erased. Their lament transforms the maids' individual experiences into a joint indictment of oppression. This is a chorus function, and it is in line with Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern subject, in which the marginalized subject is empowered

through joint, rather than individual, testimony.

The maids' genre-shifting performances can be seen as a form of embodied resistance, a concept recognized by performance studies. By performing their drama, "The Trial of Odysseus," they transform from victims to prosecutors, thereby creating alternative systems of justice that supersede the systems of justice that originally condemned them. Such a transformation shows the power of creative expression to transcend the limits of dominant discursive practices, offering a means of resistance that theoretical discourse alone cannot achieve. The most important contribution of *The Penelopiad* is its successful integration of various feminist, Marxist, and postmodern theoretical perspectives. Rather than using each of these perspectives separately, Atwood has created a text that shows the fruitful intersection of each of them in analyzing systems of oppression.

The intersection of Marxist feminism and intersectionality theory is perhaps the most useful tool for understanding the maids' situation. Marxist feminism recognizes the role of domestic labor as a key area of exploitation under capitalism, but intersectionality theory recognizes that systems of oppression interact and intersect, creating a complex web of oppression that cannot be understood through a single-axis analysis. The maids' situation is a classic example of intersectionality, as their gender positions them for sexual exploitation, their class positions them as property, and their slavery eliminates them from the legal system.

This fusion of postmodern narrative technique and feminist politics is a powerful example of the potential of formal innovation to be put in the service of ideological critique. Atwood's use of polyphony and genre-bending is not merely an exercise in formal innovation, but opens up possibilities for marginalised voices to express experiences that would normally be excluded by dominant ideologies. This fusion of the disciplines undermines the spurious dichotomy between the formal and the political, which has traditionally constrained the potential of both postmodern and feminist criticism.

This interdisciplinary study of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* has shown that the text is a sophisticated intervention in both feminist literary criticism and postmodern narrative theory. Through the fusion of the three disciplines, it has been demonstrated that Atwood's text is not merely a retelling but a radical critique of the ideologies surrounding gender, class, and narrative.

#### **Conclusion:**

*The Penelopiad* achieves its goal of empowering silenced voices, subverting dominant structures, deconstructing the ideal character, and revealing class injustices through innovative narrative styles. The polyphonic narrative, genre-bending narrative styles, and character deconstruction in *The Penelopiad* are not only literary devices but political tools that create new possibilities for silenced voices to express experiences that dominant discourses often erase. *The Penelopiad*, therefore, affirms the cultural significance of mythic revisionism: its revision of classical myth serves purposes beyond the realm of literary pleasure. The text's revision of classical myth to reveal the continuation of injustices and create new possibilities for justice and solidarity underscores its significance as a cultural intervention that demonstrates the political utility of rewriting classical narratives. The text's relevance to contemporary social issues suggests that feminist revisionist literature will remain a vital genre in the struggle against oppressive narratives.

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