

## Using the Metanarrative: *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood as a Palimpsest

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### Abstract

This paper aims to re-read *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood's novella that contests the position of the original Greek narrative- "the edifying legend" of Penelope who is considered to be the "quintessential faithful wife" in Greek mythology. In her chapter titled 'Works,' Heidi Macpherson, an Atwood critic explains the later's attempt and love for writing palimpsestic texts. In the Atwoodian sense, a palimpsest "is layered over with meanings that erase and disrupt the picture that the reader receives." Macpherson, 2010, 33). An attempt is made in this paper to examine the novella as a palimpsestic text that revisits, questions and contests the patriarchal text from the point of view of Penelope, the protagonist and the twelve Maids who were hanged by her husband Odysseus and her son Telemachus for the reasons that have always been unknown. The paper will discuss a few critical bearings based on feminist concerns such as interrogating the male glorification at the cost of silencing the female voice. It will also examine a few postmodernist revisionist techniques such as metanarrative and ambiguity in the light of the rendering the myth from a new perspective.

**KEYWORDS;** palimpsest, patriarchy, violence, oppression, female slaves, marginalization

A metanarrative is a term much used in the postmodernist context. It was much criticized by Jean-Francois Lyotard. He doubted the efficacy of what has been used "to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values." (*New World Encyclopaedia*, np.). The term 'narrative' or 'story' is used for what we might ordinarily call a 'theory' about the way the world operates. Generally theories are taken by common folks as the objective truth. Layers and layers of narratives pile up to form a metanarrative over the span of centuries. Reading the text from a different viewpoint or from the point of view of a more local, regional or personal context is what has been advocated by the postmodernist thinkers.

In *The Penelopiad*, we come to read about Penelope's version of the classical myth of her being labeled as a "sincere and devoted" wife of Odysseus. Atwood creates a parody of the Homeric text and reveals the psychological insights of this mythological character who is "since being dead-since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness" resorts to "a low art, tale telling." (1). This text is not written with a third-person, omniscient narrator who exists outside the characters in the story. Instead, there are active narrators who openly insert themselves in the stories they are telling and are self-conscious of their own narration.

Referring to the concept of metanarrative, Linda Hutcheon opines:

In response to the question of metanarrative, postmodernism's stand is one of wanting to contest cultural dominants( patriarchy, capitalism, humanism etc. ) and yet knowing it cannot extricate itself from them: there is no position outside these metanarratives from which to launch a critique that is not itself compromised ( 'Incredulity Toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms,' 1994, 187).

But to this stand, Hutcheon argues, "feminisms want to go beyond this work to change those systems, not just to "de-doxify" them (187) Atwood's novella actually raises many questions other than feminism such as anthropological, political, psychological and others that leads to gender inequality, cultural disparities, ecological disasters and economic disadvantages for certain underprivileged sections of society. That Penelope and the twelve Maids question the decision of Odysseus in the present court of law and Penelope's insistence and appeal to women of today – "Don't follow my example" ( 2) are examples of the warnings they give to humankind to stop injustice and its long term ill effects from corrupting a society.

Margaret Atwood, a poet, novelist, critic and essayist has been a keen environmental activist. Her oeuvres consist of more than forty volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and non-fiction. She is best known for her novels, which include *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin*, which won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2000. Her newest novel, *MaddAddam* (2013), is the final volume in a three-book series that began with the Man-Booker prize-nominated *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and continued with *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Her non-fiction book, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* was adapted for the screen in 2012. Atwood's work has been published in more than forty languages, including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic and Estonian.

*The Penelopiad* is one of the books in the Canongate Myth Series in which the present writers rewrite ancient myths. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood rewrites the story of Homer's account of *The Odyssey*. Penelope – wife of Odysseus and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy – is portrayed as a faithful wife. Her story stands as an exemplary lesson through the ages. Soon after the birth of her son Telemachus, Odysseus had to leave for the Trojan War after the abduction of Helen. Penelope patiently waits for twenty long years for Odysseus during which he is said to "have spent half of these years fighting the Trojan War and the other half wandering around the Aegean Sea, trying to get home, enduring hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses" ( *The Penelopiad* : Introduction). Meanwhile Penelope, " In addition to weeping and praying for the return of Odysseus, cleverly deceives the many Suitors who are swarming around her palace, eating up Odysseus' estate in an attempt to force her to marry one of them." Simultaneously she also tackles her teenage, ambitious son Telemachus. In due course of time, Odysseus returns and kills the Suitors and the twelve maids who had been close to the Suitors.

Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* questions the killings of the maids and Penelope's mysterious silence while the maids were being hung for punishment. Atwood retells the story from the point of view of Penelope and the twelve Maids and justifies the same by commenting:

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus, which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of the *Odyssey*: What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in the *Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself ('Introduction,' xiv-xv)

Atwood uses the technique of introducing multiple voices and narrators in order to bring out the unspoken truths. The first chapter of the novella is titled as "A Low Art." Atwood takes up the task of "tale telling" practiced generally by "old women.... Strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants" and "to spin a thread of her own". Thousands of stories about Penelope's fidelity and faithfulness have been woven so far in these two thousand and more years so much so that they 'have run out of air.' Now when she is dead and in a state of "bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness," she chooses to tell her version of story to the present day readers. But of course, there are difficulties. Penelope says:

The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak, I can't make myself understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers, most of the time, I have no listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may have caught the odd whisper, the odd squeak, so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams. (3)

The second narrator is the collective voice of the twelve Maids and their tale. The second Chapter "A Rope-Jumping Rhyme" and the following chapters under "The Chorus Line" heading voice the cry of the maids who were actually engaged by Penelope to spy upon the Suitors and keep them seduced so that Penelope could be saved from their malign designs. The chorus is directly asking questions to Penelope "we scrubbed the blood/ of our dead/ paramours from floors, from chairs ..... while you stared/ at our bare feet/ it was not fair(6) It is later on Ch.XXIII that Penelope gives a reply: "I slept through the mayhem. How could I have done such a thing? I suspect Eurycleia put something in the comforting drink she gave me."(125)

Atwood uses the technique of intertextuality in order to bring out many versions of the unspoken truths. The title of Margaret Atwood's novella makes the reader expect a rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey*, which is precisely what the author does in order to enrich it with new interpretations; since myths and legends are the repository of our collective desires, fears and longings, their actuality can never be exhausted. One of the Atwoodian critics has rightly commented:

Atwood has used mythology in much the same way she has used other intertexts like folk tales, fairy tales, and legends, replaying the old stories in new contexts and from

different perspectives – frequently from a woman’s point of view – so that the stories shimmer with new meanings.

Let us look at the novella in the light of the modern reading of the classical myth of Penelope that Margaret Atwood imagines in comparison with the primary text – Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*, making use of two frames of reading: postmodernism and feminism.

Firstly, the title of the novella induces the reader to expect an epic poem, but in the good postmodernist tradition Margaret Atwood produces a hybrid of several genres: Penelope’s first person narrative (19 out of 29 chapters), interspersed with the 10 chapters delivered by a chorus line of 12 maids (those hanged by Odysseus for betrayal of loyalty, subsequent to his slaughter of over 20 Suitors trying to woo Penelope in marriage in view of grabbing his kingdom), 8 chapters written in various lyrical forms and two in dramatic forms. There is a scene of video tape, rhyme, idyll, ballad, short drama, an anthropology lecture, a court trial and a love song. All these elements represent the modern day setting and time.

Although the novella is categorized into the genre of a dramatic monologue where the Penelope, the central protagonist addresses the present reader, Atwood repeatedly uses the chorus line of the hanged maids, a device that has been inspired by the ancient Greek dramatic technique. The collective character that often expresses public fears or the fears, plight, voice of the personae that includes the slave maids as well as the protagonist who voice their version of the classical story certainly makes a mixed kind of genre that is quite contrary to the classical epic style. One also finds that Atwood refers to Robert Graves’s *The Greek Myths* from where she has taken the information about Penelope’s ancestry and her family relations. Graves himself referred to Herodotus, Pausanias, Appollodorus and Hyginus and many others for his book. So the novella could very well be exemplified as a “vehicle of other intertexts”. Thus we can also say that the final outcome of this intertextual quality of the novella is a new post modernist hybrid structure.

Parody is the paradoxical postmodern way of coming to terms with the past. Funda Basak Basqan opines that Atwood “demystifies the patriarchal construction of female figures in Homer’s work by rewriting them as we all as the impact of the revisionist mythology on the literary canon (‘To set the Record Straight for Good,’2010, 222). Atwood tells the subverted version of Penelope’s myth which had for centuries portrayed her as a woman who has been a symbol of patience and constant. When Penelope realizes that she too was turned into a story, or rather stories, the same sort of contradictory stories “both clean and dirty”, she becomes eager to tell her own version of the events, but she had to wait for a long time otherwise her defence might have been misunderstood as a confession of her guilt. She feels that she owes it to herself to recount her own clever and resourceful handling of the suitors; she also feels that she has been brave and resourceful as Odysseus himself. When her husband returns home and they exchange stories, she describes him as “the nobler version” casting doubt on her own account.

She practically cancels the truth value of their narrations by highlighting his and her own status of being unreliable narrators. She says:

The two of us were- by our own admission- proficient and shameless liars of longstanding . it’s a wonder either of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other. (138)

Penelope deconstructs official stories in other instances too – for instance, the story of how she inspired a statue to Modesty by her pulling down her veil when Odysseus asked her if she had acted of her own free will following her husband to his kingdom, rather than remaining at her father’s court as the custom required. The act was interpreted as an answer that silently bespoke the desire for her husband. But now she reveals the real motivation of her gesture: There’s some truth to this story. But I pulled down my veil to hide the fact that I was laughing. You have to admit there was something humorous about a father who’d once tossed his own child into the sea capering down the road after that very child and calling, “Stay with me!” (40)

Therefore Penelope’s version of her own home-sitting “odyssey” is enriched with an account of her origins (as the daughter of king Icarius of Sparta and his naiad queen), of how her hand was (dishonestly) won by Odysseus in a running contest, of her sea voyage to Ithaca and her hard life there as a daughter-in-law to Anticleia. She mentions Odysseus’ reputation as “a friend of Hermes” among the other contestants, which was an elegant way of saying he was “a cheat and a thief” – just like his grandfather Autolycus . But she also reveals a new facet of Ulysses, his kindness as a husband and his appreciation of companionship with a clever wife.

From the feminist perspective Penelope’s dilemma is challenging the stereotypical gender-roles in a society where jobs- domestic or non-domestic- are clearly assigned to men and women. In her story Penelope portrays herself in the light of a peer consort, an equal match to a trickster hero, extending Helen’s cruel remark that “She and Odysseus are two of a kind. They both have such short legs , to her advantage. Jealousy and envy for her cousin Helen’s beauty are other aspects of Penelope’s personality set off by The Penelopiad.

Although in the female romance Penelope shares a noble birth with the male hero, her quest and trials are in a different field than slaying an antagonist in direct combat. Her female quest, which she finds heroic, is to keep Odysseus’s kingdom prosperous and proper in the first place And also “whole and safe” from the suitors’ greedy wish to appropriate it.” For the first test she can do things herself emulating a man’s qualities and expertise: she proudly describes herself as a successful administrator of the estates –learning how to make inventories, how to bargain and acquiring knowledge of goat- breeding, although as a princess she was not prepared for this work. It is worth remarking that Atwood introduces a new element in this context: when he becomes a young man, Telemachus assumes the role of Penelope’s latent antagonist as he aspires to become the ruler of his father’s kingdom, an attitude that is only hinted at in the Odyssey, Bk I.

In her second test, Penelope cannot engage in a direct confrontation; she can only use shrewdness and trickster abilities. The historically specific feminine weapons in a patriarchal society are silence and dissimulation, her action being bracketed with undoing (she unweaves at night what she has industriously woven in daytime). While the hero is always present and active, she is frequently absent and (apparently) passive, letting others do the things that fit her design: she employs the maids as her spies and uses their sexual favours to her suitors as a delaying trick, playing for time. The narrator designates her chief character trait to be a justified distrust of everybody, a feature acquired early in her childhood when her father had her thrown into the sea, most likely to get rid of her and his obligation to provide a princess’s dowry for her.

That is why she does not reveal her secret scheme with the maids – not even to Eurycleia (Ulysses’ faithful nurse), who thus not only fails to defend them from his anger, but also turns Penelope into an accomplice to their cruel death. The latter feels guilty and tries to atone for their deaths by saying prayers and performing secret sacrifices for their souls. On the other hand, her distrustful nature makes her suspect that Eurycleia was aware of her agreement to the maids’ rebellious behaviour, but singled them out for Ulysses to kill out of her spiteful resentment at having been excluded from the plot and her “desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus.” She says:

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his... unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises, I didn’t contradict, I didn’t ask awkward questions, I didn’t dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the tight doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages. (3)

This passage throws a different light on the fact that Penelope slept throughout the slaughter of the suitors and the hanging of the maids – as a deliberate stratagem. Silence can frequently be kept at a cost, as Penelope confesses to the terrible effort she makes to say nothing when Eurycleia brings her the news of her maids’ deaths: “What could I do? Lamentation wouldn’t bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It’s a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently I had bitten it over the years.”

She has learned this strategy of patient apparent non-resistance the hard way, but it is also a lesson to be drawn from nature; it is the attitude her own mother teaches her as her birthright, since she is the daughter of a naiad, a water spirit:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall. , it will not stop you. But water always wants to go where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it...Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go round it. Water does (36).

To conclude, Atwood’s text reaffirms the female voice in the contemporary times while reflecting upon the past. Multiple voices in multiple genres reveal what Penelope admits, “Now that I’m dead I know everything...I know only a few factoids that I didn’t know before”(1). The technique of attempting elements of a parody, palimpsest and tell-tale that has been tried by Atwood in almost all her leading works such as *Surfacing*, *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* undoubtedly makes *The Penelopiad* a wonderful reading.

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