Penelope as a Desperate Housewife: Margaret Atwood's Retelling of the Penelope Myth in *The Penelopiad* and Some Other Modern Penelopes

Igor Maver

Abstract
The article seeks to examine the female voice empowerment in the rewriting of the Odysseus and Penelope myth described by Homer in *The Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), as well as several other contemporary literary Penelopes. Loyalty within the *oikos* is addressed, since Odysseus's punishment of unfaithful subjects is performed through bloody actions under Odysseus's orders in his palace. Twelve maids from among his fifty servants have shown disrespect to Penelope and her son Telemachus during his absence, by becoming concubines of the Suitors, thus violating their *oikos* duty of sexual fidelity towards their patriarch and king. The question of violence, as exemplified by Odysseus's hanging of Penelope's servant maids, is given special attention in the essay and the reasons for this severe punishment for their sexual 'betrayal' are speculated upon from the comparative literary point of view and the gender distribution of social power. This is the main theme of Atwood's rewriting of the ancient Greek myth along with her formal innovations, such as, for example, the introduction of the Greek chorus. Some of the recent modern versions of the Penelope myth are also discussed in relation to Atwood's Penelopiad.

Keywords: Homer, Penelope, Atwood, comparative literary approach

1. Margaret Atwood's rewrite of the Penelope myth and men and women within the *oikos* in Homer's time

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood published a short novel (some critics prefer to label it a novella) titled *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005) in which she rewrites the famous ancient Greek epic *The Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus's wife, Penelope. It is part of the series initiated by the Scottish Canongate Press from Edinburgh in 1999, to which major international authors have so far

contributed, for example Jeanette Winterson, A. S. Byatt, Su Tong, Alexander McCall Smith and several others. Atwood's point of departure that dominates her modern version of the Penelope myth, with Penelope being presented as a "flawless Penelope, Icarius's daughter […] the constant Penelope" (Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 24, 191-94), is in that she is given the voice to present her version of the story. Atwood's focus is, in fact, on Odysseus's unusually violent act and, according to Penelope, a most unjust punishment, the hanging of her twelve youngest and best loved servant-maids, for their alleged sexual misbehaviour and 'betrayal' of their *oikos* (household, family) patriarch and king during his absence from Ithaca:

> […] he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare […] so the women's heads were fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (pp. 470-3)

A man in the Greek *oikos* was the head (*kyrios*, master) of the household. In this sense, he was responsible for representing the interests of his *oikos* to the wider *polis* and provided legal protection to the women and minors with whom he shared his household. Although men were part of both the *polis* and *oikos*, women only had a role in the *oikos*. As described in Homer's poetry, female characters of the upper classes led a relatively independent life. Although women technically were citizens, they had no actual rights of citizenship and could take no part in government. They could conduct only limited business, inherit and hold limited property. All business was done on a woman's behalf by her husband or father. By contrast, in *The Odyssey* Penelope assumes the role of the *kyrios* "running the vast estates" (Atwood 2005: 85). At home women were kept segregated in their own quarters, called *gynaikonitis*, and were virtually unseen (Cf. Cox 1998). They were responsible only for their *oikos*, which included providing for slaves, children, cooking, cleaning, caring for the sick, and making clothes. Much was done also by female slaves but only under the supervision of the head of the household. There were a number of reasons why ancient

Greek men, like Odysseus in Homer's myth, carefully guarded the faithfulness of their wives. One of them was that traditionally illegitimate children were deprived of many rights in most Greek city-states; should a male heir's legitimacy be called into question because of his mother's chastity, his family line could come to an end. Another cause for fear was the threat of an outsider gaining access to the *oikos* and its inner sanctum, either through the woman he was sleeping with, or their child.

If Homer in *The Odyssey* compares the maids to thrushes and doves, then Margaret Atwood at the end of *The Penelopiad* draws a bird parallel between Penelope's hanged maids and owls. They are thus not merely symbolising wisdom and prophetic intelligence, but also symbolising the owl that accompanies a spirit to the underworld by winging its newly freed soul from the physical world into the realm of the spirit: "*The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls*" (Atwood 2005: 196). It is likewise true, however, that upon his return to Ithaca, Odysseus showed no pity and a great degree of physical violence also towards the Suitors, who had been trying to push Penelope into marrying one of them. He killed them all and punished his disloyal goatherd Melanthius, who had helped them during his absence, in an extreme form of physical mutilation:

> […] /he/ made mincemeat of every last one of the Suitors, first with arrows, then with spears and swords. Telemachus and two faithful herdsmen helped him; nevertheless it was a considerable feat…. He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors out into the courtyard – including the bodies of their erstwhile lovers – and to wash the brains and gore off the floor, and to clean whatever chairs and tables remained intact. […] Right after that, said Eurycleia – who could not disguise her gloating pleasure – Odysseus and Telemachus hacked off the ears and nose and hands and feet and genitals of Melanthius the evil goatherd and threw them to the dogs, paying no attention to the poor man's agonised screams. 'They had to make an example of him,' said Eurycleia, 'to discourage any further defections.' (pp. 158-9)

According to the myth and original story, during Odysseus's twenty-year absence, his wife, Penelope, had remained faithful to him, but she was constantly under enormous pressure to remarry. A number of Suitors were occupying her palace, drinking and eating

and behaving irreverently to Penelope and her son, Telemachus. Odysseus arrived at the palace, disguised as a beggar, and observed their behaviour and his wife's fidelity. He eventually revealed his identity and with the help of Telemachus and Laertes slaughtered the Suitors and the twelve maids. He then had to fight one final battle, against the outraged relatives of the men he had slain.

The epic poses the question of who is the man that should take charge of the *oikos* and *polis* during Odysseus's absence. What may and does happen during the Odysseus's absence? *The Odyssey* stands in opposition to the *Iliad*, as a husband and a wife reunite in a marriage that is symbolised by their steadfast marriage-bed, where its construction represents a reliable and private sign of alliance and partnership between them as a married couple: "Thus the *Odyssey* performs a kind of reclamation of the *oikos* that requires the wife's sexual fidelity but also the husband's successful return and successful elimination of all competitors for his wife" (Felson and Slatkin 2004: 103).

> *The Odyssey*, far from providing a competing paradigm of social relations, as discussed above, or questioning marital relations as the basis of order and stability, puts marriage at the centre – for its human characters at least. (p. 104)

Atwood's rewriting of the Penelope myth is an essentially feminist one, despite the fact that Atwood herself disclaims this label and would perhaps settle for a 'proto-feminist' one instead, for she publicly refused to align herself with the feminist movement. However, her main protagonists are mostly women shown as victims or even monstrous females:

> One of the key questions of any exploration of Atwood and her work is the extent to which she can be considered a feminist writer […]. Indeed, the majority of the criticism on Atwood's oeuvre is decidedly feminist, which means that critics must grapple with the fact that so many of her characters spout anti-feminist sentiments – whilst clearly being entrapped in a patriarchal framework that cries out for feminist interpretation. (Slettedahl Macpherson 2010: 23)

She introduces an important presence of the chorus to give the text a more dramatic tragic credence. Atwood's Penelope rewrites the

epic from the female perspective; her suffering, largely on account of her gender, and her innermost doubts are primarily put into perspective, rather than just her proverbial faithfulness in waiting for her husband to return, despite the increasingly pushy Suitors, seeking to replace Odysseus in her bed. She resorts to an ingenious stratagem of the seemingly never-finished shroud:

> So I foolishly thought myself quite wise. In retrospect I can see that my actions were ill-considered, and caused harm. But I was running out of time, and becoming desperate, and I had to use every ruse and stratagem at my command.
>
> When they found out about the trick I'd played on them with the shroud, the Suitors broke into my quarters at night and caught me at my work. They were very angry, not least because they'd been fooled by a woman, and they made a terrible scene, and I was put on the defensive. (p. 118)

2. An analysis of *The Penelopiad*

Margaret Atwood uses as mottoes two extracts from *The Odyssey*. The first one stresses Penelope's constancy: "Shrewd Odysseus! [...] You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter" (Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 24, 191-4). The second one revolves around one of the central images Atwood is haunted by, the hanging of the twelve maids: "As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare […] so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end" (Book 22, 470-3). The book is divided into several chapters, interrupted by individual chorus lines spoken by the maids (written in various literary genres: jump-rope rhyme, lament, idyll, ballad, lecture, court trial, sea shanty, a drama, a love song), towards the end they videotape the contemporary trial of Odysseus, based on written 'evidence' and individual personal 'depositions'. Atwood's use of chorus is a tribute to the tradition of chorus as used in Greek drama, namely the burlesquing of the main action through the use of satyr plays performed before serious dramas. However, this was not much appreciated by some critics (e.g. Alexander; Dekkers and Leavis). This is an example of how Penelope tries to avoid her responsibility for not protecting her maids from the Suitors' sexual appetite and death.

Attorney for the Defence: I wasn't there, Your Honour. All of this took place some three or four thousand years before my time.

Judge: I can see the problem. Call the witness Penelope.

Penelope: I was asleep, Your Honour. I was often asleep. I can only tell you what they said afterwards.

Judge: They said they'd been raped?

Penelope: Well, yes, Your Honour. In effect. …

Penelope: I knew them well, Your Honour. I was fond of them. I'd brought some of them up, you could say. They were like daughters I never had. (*Starts to weep.*) I felt so sorry for them! But most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life. It wasn't the fact of their being raped that told against them, in the mind of Odysseus. It's that they were raped without permission. (pp. 180-1)

The judge finally concludes and dismisses the case, despite the protesting maids wanting justice to be done:

Judge: … However, your client's times were not our times. Standards of behaviour were different then. It would be unfortunate if this regrettable but minor accident were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career. Also I do not wish to be guilty of an anachronism. Therefore I must dismiss the case. (p. 182)

The beautiful Helen of Troy is given a particularly negative slant by Penelope. Her cousin (in the chapter titled "Helen Ruins My Life") is described by Penelope as reckless, irresponsible and narcissistic in starting a (Trojan) war.

I've often wondered whether, if Helen hadn't been so puffed up with vanity, we might all have been spared the sufferings and sorrows she brought down on our heads by her selfishness and her deranged lust. Why couldn't she have led a normal life? But no – normal lives were boring, and Helen was ambitious. She wanted to make a name for herself. She longed to stand out from the herd. (p. 76)

In the introduction to *The Penelopiad* Atwood stresses that Penelope has traditionally been viewed as the quintessentially faithful wife, but also a woman known for her intelligence in keeping away the swarming Suitors, who try to force her to marry one of them: not only does she lead them on with false promises, but also weaves a shroud by day that she unravels at night, thus delaying her marriage decision until the shroud is finished: her weaving skills indicate her passionate nature, which is however very much rationally controlled

as well, being constantly aware of social limitations on account of her gender, albeit being Queen of Ithaca, a wife and a mother.

> […] Odysseus himself shambled into the courtyard [...] dressed as a dirty old beggar. [...] I didn't let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him: it's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness. (pp. 135-7)

As is known from the Greek myth, the narrative ends with the slaughter of the Suitors by Odysseus and his son Telemachus, as well as the hanging of the twelve maids who have been sleeping with the Suitors, and the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. However, Atwood gives the main role to several female narrators, not only Penelope, and is very clear on the main focus in her book:

> 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. (p. xv)

Atwood acknowledges the great influence of the book *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves (1975) upon her understanding and revisioning the Penelope myth. He proposed the theory that Penelope was a possible female-goddess cult leader (taking his cue from earlier sources such as Herodotus, Pausanias, Apollodorus, etc), the topic Atwood in addition to *The Penelopiad* had also addressed elsewhere in her work (e.g. *Payback*).

At the beginning of the book we can see that Penelope is speaking to us from Hades, the land of the dead (*Now that I'm dead I know everything*, p. 1), which is why her version of the events may lend more credibility. She is sorry now to have been turned into an edifying legend for other women and wants to scream to the world of the living, especially women, "Don't follow my example". In Chorus Line ii ("A Rope-Jumping Rhyme") the twelve hanged maids express their reproach and grudge against Odysseus that society's rules are not the same for males and females as far as sexuality goes:

With every goddess, queen, and bitch
From there to here
You scratched your itch
We did much less
Than what you did
You judged us bad (p. 5)

Penelope from the start mentions her distrust of the patriarchal system in society. Her father, for instance, at her birth threw her into the water to see if she could survive, which she did, and, having a mother "chilly at heart" (p. 10), she learned to be self-sufficient, for she could "hardly count on family support" (p. 11). From the other side of the river Styx, she then traces her own marriage and is very critical of the institution of marriage in ancient Greek society:

Under the old rules only important people had marriages, because only important people had inheritances. All the rest was just copulation of various kinds – rapes or seductions, love affairs or one-night stands, with gods who said they were shepherds or shepherds who said they were gods. (p. 23)

Before she was married she represented "a risk" (p. 30) and she had several maids with her to help and watch out for her, who were also her sources of inspiration. Odysseus won her hand and she found out later he had been cheating, according to Atwood's Penelope, because he was probably more interested in the dowry rather than Penelope herself. She was outshone by the scintillating beauty of her cousin Helen on her wedding day at the age of fifteen: "And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you" (p. 39). Penelope arrived in Ithaca with the maid Actoris and the person who at first gave her most trouble was Odysseus's former nurse, Eurycleia, a former slave-woman. Soon after Penelope's arrival, Telemachus was born.

The chapter "Helen Ruins My Life" is very revealing, for Penelope sees her cousin as "poison on legs", one that started the Trojan War, a breach of all traditions and economic social arrangements:

Menelaus was now in a red rage, and so was his brother Agamemnon because of the slight to the family honour. They'd sent emissaries to

Troy, demanding the return of both Helen and the plunder, but these had come back empty-handed. Meanwhile, Paris and the wicked Helen were laughing at them from behind the lofty walls of Troy. […] repressed a desire to say that Helen should have been kept in a locked trunk in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs. Instead I said, 'Will you have to go?' I was devastated at the thought of having to stay in Ithaca without Odysseus. (p. 78)

Penelope further describes her waiting and the way in which she had to run the estates without having been used to it. Her maid Melantho was helpful in these matters, but she still felt very much alone. Chorus Line xiii, "The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty", delivered by the maids is written in the form of a ballad in the traditional ballad stanza, portraying Odysseus as a master of disguise who even conned Circe. In the long years of absence Penelope is able to keep the Suitors at bay, although […] "I have to admit that I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that" (p. 105). In her relationship with the now almost grown-up son Telemachus she is sure he does not want his inheritance to be gobbled up by a stepfather, so she constantly weaves and then undoes the shroud, in "a living death" (p. 113).

Penelope reveals what her secret activity was, she had asked twelve maids, the loveliest, to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, however, the "plan came to grief. Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hardpressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (p. 115). This was their 'crime', and some of them really fell in love with some of the Suitors, thus betraying the rule of conduct and their master *in absentia*, perhaps never to return. Penelope is genuinely sorry for having devised such a plan, but she never expected Odysseus to punish them in such an atrocious way. The maids remind us that myths are powerful, but they are also very fragile. Even the stories Penelope hears of her husband's exploits are often little more than unreliable rumours. According to one report, Atwood writes, the Cyclops was only a "one-eyed tavern keeper," the struggle between her husband and the monster merely a quarrel over the "non-payment of the bill", which banalises the story, without rendering it more relevant for contemporary readers.

In Chorus Line xxi "The Perils of Penelope" the maids perform a modern drama of Penelope who may have cheated on Odysseus in his absence, and hence was not a role model wife. This means a big challenge for society; so the maids accuse Penelope of blaming it on the slaves, on the maids – was Penelope really so innocent and sincere from their point of view?

Let them dangle, let them strangle –
Blame it on the slaves!
Blame it on the sluts!
These poxy little scuts!
We've got the dirt on every skirt –
Blame it on the sluts! (p. 152)

Atwood ends *The Penelopiad* by writing that Odysseus will be forever persecuted by the slaughtered maids, even in Hades, since they have turned into some sort of Erinyes as can be seen from the final speech of the maids:

We took the blame
It was not fair
But now we're here
We're all here too
The same as you

And now we follow
You, we find you
Now, we call
To you to you (p. 195)

3. Some other modern Penelopes and the persistent appeal of the Penelope myth

To date there have been very many dramatic adaptations and rewrites of Penelope's version of the mythical story in several world languages (see Grigar 1995), more recently, for example, the Irish dramatist Enda Walsh's modern reimagining of *Penelope* (2010), various musical pieces and theatre stagings, including Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, for the first time in 2007. Like much of the American poet Louise Glück's work, her *Meadowlands* (1996), for example, is also rooted in the contests of love and power that

characterise the famous Greek myth. Here *The Odyssey* supplies the story: *Meadowlands* is a sequence of poems, structured as skillful digressions that parallel Odysseus's wanderings (Glück 1996). The 'meadowlands' of the title suggest a nostalgic pastoral vision of the past, as well as a contemporary setting. In a deflation of classical grandeur, Giants Stadium in New Jersey symbolises the site of (gender) contest between the two lovers and conjugal partners Odysseus and Penelope, who tell their own versions of 'truth', interspersed with a series of 'Parables'. Glück gives us neither the patient Penelope image of Homer nor the resourceful and empowered Penelope of the various feminist revisions such as Atwood's. It is little wonder, then, that the narrative of Odysseus and Penelope moves steadily toward their separation. In Glück's contemporary rendition, it is divorce, not reunion, that more fittingly ends the story. Penelope essentially becomes a modern housewife, desperate in many different ways.

Penelope's Song
Little soul, little perpetually undressed one,
Do now as I bid you, climb
The shelf-like branches of the spruce tree;
Wait at the top, attentive, like
A sentry or look-out. He will be home soon;
It behooves you to be
Generous. You have not been completely
Perfect either; with your troublesome body
You have done things you shouldn't
Discuss in poems. Therefore
Call out to him over the open water, over the bright water
With your dark song, with your grasping,
Unnatural song – passionate,
Like Maria Callas. Who
Wouldn't want you? Whose most demonic appetite
Could possibly fail to answer? Soon
He will return from wherever he goes in the meantime,
Suntanned from his time away, wanting his grilled chicken. Ah, you must greet him,
You must shake the boughs of the tree
To get his attention,
But carefully, carefully lest
His beautiful face be marred
By too many falling needles. (Glück 1996)

Among the plethora of recent rewrites of the Penelope myth, some of the well-known ones in terms of critical reception in languages other than English are, for example, Annie Leclerc's *Toi Pénélope* (2001) and Bianca Tarozzi's poem "Variazioni sul tema di Penelope" (1989).

I fili di Penelope, ripresi,
conducono alle soglie del mistero –
un emisfero
che non sa inventare.
Ora discesa
sulla riva, dal mare risuonante
sente voci lontane, antichi naufraghi,
fantasmi che la vogliono afferrare:
tutte le guerre che non ha perduto
né vinto,
tutti gli amori che non ha vissuto
il dolore e il furore degli eroi,
che non le spetta:
scempio,
dolce urlare del vento
dentro l'anima.
Ritorna sui suoi passi.
L'esperienza
del limite per lei
è l'acqua incollerita della riva –
per Ulisse lo schianto
e la fine tremenda
contro gli scogli, verso la leggenda. (Tarozzi 1989)

Penelope has had a very special appeal for contemporary Italian literary authors, which is why some of them are mentioned here: they are related to Atwood's retelling primarily through the female figure of an empowered and rebellious Penelope. The Italian writer Silvana La Spina's *Penelope*, for example, is particularly interesting and different from several other literary Penelopes from the point of view of its ending. In addition to Tarozzi's, more recent Penelopes have been published in Italian (e. g. Monica Farnetti, "Non così per Penelope", 2007; Luigi Malerba, *Itaca per sempre*, 1998), which testifies to the mythical and archetypal figure's lasting appeal. In La Spina's text not only is Penelope given the voice and Odysseus

shown in a very critical light, but also Penelope becomes active at the end and snaps both out of her marriage and passivity: she decides to leave Ithaca herself, opting for the freedom of a queen, wife and woman. The author shows Penelope's relationship with the community of women around her. Penelope tells (a tale) about the maid Euriclea, Odysseus's nurse, who decides to run away with her from Ithaca into the "silent freedom", La Spina's writing seeks to create a non-hierarchical model of being between mother and son, to challenge both the gender hierarchy as well as the sacrificial notion of motherhood that lies at the centre of the Catholic view, which at times characterises some of her literary work. Penelope's resolute empowerment at the end of the book is described in Italian very clearly by both the departing Penelope and Euriclea for the open seas, never to be found by Odysseus again:

Adesso guardami negli occhi, nutrice, e dimmi: per quest'uomo mi hai conservata? Per questo feroce tramatore di menzogne, per questo uomo violento, rude e così […] estraneo?

– perdono, Penelope, perdono, – singhiozza lei. E si getta ai miei piedi, guaisce come una cagna.

Questa notte ho deciso. Non attenderò che il suo destino si compia – perché, diamocelo con franchezza, nutrice, è un tale mentitore che potrebbe non partire mai.

E allora?

Partirò io, Penelope. […]

Ti prego, Penelope, ti prego non lasciarmi qui […] con loro. […]

Non ci ha mai trovate. Io, Euriclea, e la mia signora, Penelope, regina di Itaca, ci siamo salvate dalla furia di Odisseo. Per anni siamo state due donne […] nell'immenso regno del divino Poseidone: albe, tramonti, tempeste. Tutto. (La Spina 1998)

Looking at another well-known Italian rewriting of the Penelope myth, Luigi Malerba's book *Itaca per sempre*, one can establish that this is another rewrite of the myth from the point of view of the battle of the sexes and a critique of the male standpoint represented by Odysseus. The portrayal of the maids represents an interesting element. Malerba respects the representation of the maids in *The Odyssey*, since both Odysseus and Penelope call them evil, and Melantho is called the most evil of all female slaves (Malerba 1998: 49), a description that echoes that in *The Odyssey*. She even

tries to steal Penelope's jewellery (p. 49). In the novel, Penelope also accuses her of being involved with Antinous, the leader of the Suitors: it seems that Melantho often spends the night in Antinous's bed. This description matches the one used in *The Odyssey*, but is, however, fundamentally different from Atwood's account of the story, where Melantho might be the cheekiest, but only flatters the Suitors because Penelope has told her to do so. A renegotiation of the conjugal bond, where each spouse starts to appear as equal partner in a non-hierarchal relationship, serves as the axis of Malerba's rewriting of the Penelope myth. He toys with the myth and by overturning the traditional view and making Odysseus a weak man and Penelope a strong woman, he subverts the roles allotted to them by the canon.

Malerba gives voice to his strong character, Penelope, who, aware of her supression, expresses the idea that women have the right to commit adultery and travel just like her husband Odysseus:

> Non capisco con quanta presunzione Ulisse abbia sospettato della mia fedeltà. Non mi ha forse ripetutamente tradito durante i suoi viaggi? È forse meno doloroso per una donna il tradimento del suo uomo di quanto non sia doloroso per un uomo il tradimento della sua donna?
>
> Chi ha stabilito che una donna debba soffrire e perdonare?
>
> [...]
>
> E perché mai, ho pensato, non dovrei fare anch'io qualche bel viaggio? Quando avranno finito il primo poema chiederò a Ulisse di portarmi in Egitto. Mi dicono meraviglie di questo paese e io da quando mi sono sposata non sono mai uscita da Itaca, come da una prigione. Per caso solo gli uomini hanno diritto a viaggiare? (Malerba 154, 175)

In her magisterial study of the figure of Penelope in Western literature, *Penelopeia: The Making of Penelope in Homer's Story and Beyond* (Grigar 1995), Dene Grigar notes some 128 works of art focusing on Penelope up to the year 1995. In the late twentieth century, the rewriting of ancient myths was triggered by the critical reworking of the idea of what we can learn from ancient myths and reasoning today. In the case of Penelope the dominant image is one of a faithful and patient, passive wife, though also a very resourceful and shrewd one. The modern renderings of her story practically without exception, including Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*,

turn this image upside down, making Penelope an empowered and active female protagonist who defies gendered ways of thinking and expected behaviour. Atwood herself, however, disclaims the fact that her book is a feminist rewrite of the Penelope myth. The voice of Penelope is the voice of a wife reinstated in an idealised marriage based on the Greek notion of *homophrosune* (oneness of heart or mind), a wife at once traditional and full of ingenuity and certainly a match for her husband. Is Homer's Penelope myth, then, just a *protasis* for numerous latter-day (proto)feminist ancient Greek rewrites (*epitases*) of the traditional Greek myth of a constant and patient wife, mother and sexual partner, including Margaret Atwood's Penelope and other modern Penelopes?

In her novel(la) *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood rewrites the Penelope myth narrative in order to demonstrate the enduring relevance of myth and its utility in providing readers with a means to explore and critique the effectiveness of judicial responses to the violent acts perpetrated upon women, thus becoming a place where literature and human rights issues come together. Reflecting Atwood's understanding of revisionism, *The Penelopiad* redrafts the story of Homer's *The Odyssey* from the point of view of Odysseus's wife, Penelope, whose influence under both ancient and modern notions of justice, becomes the voice of all women, past, present and future, and of their impotence, anger and rebellion. The story of Odysseus and Penelope in Atwood's version is made contemporary by adding the scene in the courtroom and by various references to present-day elements. The character of Penelope, the metafictional narrator moving between the past and the present, comes across as more human; a contemporary desperate housewife, who in modern retellings of the story turns her desperation into empowerment and, ultimately, greater freedom. Margaret Atwood's Penelope displays various emotions, from jealousy and resignation to regret. Her language is no longer the formal language of the epic, but colloquial. It can thus be concluded that the epic material undergoes an important change when it is converted into the form of the novella; one that also includes several other literary sub-genres. The distance between the past of the story and the present of the audience is gradually erased, when Atwood's Penelope addresses the readers of today from the Underworld of Hades, where she eventually ends up.

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