

**ANOTHER PENELOPE:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE PENELOPIAD**

Keywords: *epic; quest; hybrid genre; indeterminacy; postmodernism*

Abstract: *The paper sets out to present The Penelopiad as a rewriting of Homer's Odyssey with Penelope as the narrator. Using the Homeric intertext as well as other Greek sources collected by Robert Graves in his book The Greek Myths and Tennyson's "Ulysses," it evidences the additions that the new narrative perspective has stimulated Atwood to imagine. The Penelopiad is read as propounding a new genre, the female epic or romance where the heroine's quest is analysed on analogy with the traditional romance pattern. The paper dwells on the contradictory and parody-like versions of events and characters embedded in the text: has Penelope been the perfect patient devoted wife, a cunning lustful pretender, or the High Priestess of an Artemis cult? In conclusion, the reader can never know the truth, being tied up in the utterly puzzling indeterminacy of meaning specific to postmodernism.*

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:

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. (Wilson 215)

The paper sets out to explore the new facets of Penelope that Margaret Atwood imagines in comparison with the primary intertext, making use of two frames of reading: postmodernism and feminism.

The title also 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 written in various lyrical forms and 2 in dramatic form: Ch

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II, ironically entitled “Rope-Jumping Rhyme,” Ch IV, “Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids,” Ch VIII, “If I was A Princess, A Popular Tune,” Ch X, “The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll,” Ch XIII, “The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty,” Ch XVII, “Dreamboats, A Ballad,” Ch XXI, “The Perils of Penelope,” Ch XXIV, “An Anthropology Lecture,” Ch XXVI, “The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids,” Ch XXVIII, “We Are Walking Behind you, A Love Song,” and Ch XXIX, “Envoi.” Some critics have highlighted the work’s dramatic structure (1). Yet it seems to me that its impact on the (reading) public derives from the contrapuntal technique recommended by Philip Quarles’ metafictional theory in Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*, in addition to the fact that there is no interaction between the characters on stage – as Penelope’s narrative addresses 21st century readers; her narrative would actually require an implicit interlocutor on stage in order to be viewed as a dramatic monologue. However, the collective character of the chorus line of the hanged maids is a dramatic device that has been inspired by the ancient Greek drama practice. The novelty of this collective character (which usually expresses public opinion or the protagonists’ secret fears) is the fact that it belongs to the class of the slaves. Moreover, Atwood turns them into the vehicle of other intertexts referenced in the endnotes (Robert Graves’ *The Greek Myths*, where among the primary sources indicated are Herodotus, Pausanias, Apollodorus and Hyginus). On the whole, we could say that the end result is a new postmodern hybrid structure.

Extrapolating from Linda Hutcheon, we could say that Atwood has produced a “mythographic metafiction” wherein she makes heard two voices suppressed in Homer’s poem: that of Penelope who becomes the narrator of *her* “odyssey” and that of the 12 slave maids hanged by Ulysses on a row after doing away with the suitors. Atwood prefixes the two intertexts from the *Odyssey* that she drew on as epigraphs to her “epic”. The first fragment transcribes Agamemnon’s dithyrambic words to Ulysses on the flawless virtue and loyalty of his faithful Penelope (Bk XXIV, 191–94), words that have turned her into the literary archetype of the perfect, devoted wife. The second fragment (Bk XXII, 470–73) is a factual account, but also contains a simile and an epithet that may have puzzled and inspired the Canadian writer’s imagination: the image of the “snare” and the sympathetic attribute “pitiable,” echoed by Penelope’s remorse and her being literally haunted by the maids’ spirits in Hades.

In Chapter I Penelope delivers a metafictional comment on the “low art” of tale-telling and expresses her determination “to spin a thread” of her own (4) as a counterpart to the Homeric description of the events. Her allusion to “playing the minstrel” (4) lends her account a public show air with the world of the quick (living in the 21st century) as an audience. On the other hand her colloquial speech is very far from the epic grand style, frequently verging on the vulgar, as her cousin Helen remarks (43).

As a true postmodernist narrator, Penelope is aware of the importance of emplotment in any account and of how positionality would produce a differently embroidered account or “fabrication” (85), so that it is “hard to know what to believe”(91).Some accounts of Odysseus’ exploits project the image of an exceptionally

“clever, brave, resourceful” man, “battling supernatural monsters and beloved of goddesses”(84), whereas others portray him as an ordinary sailor, given to drinking and painting the town red. She reveals how minstrels might have transfigured their accounts to aggrandize Ulysses to the dimensions of a legendary hero in her presence, just to flatter her and get richer gifts.

According to rumours, Penelope gives a parody-like version of the various episodes of the *Odyssey*, illustrating Linda Hutcheon’s opinion that parody is “the paradoxical postmodern way of coming to terms with the past” (Hutcheon 1985: 14). Thus the Lotus–Eaters episode in which Homer recounts that Odysseus had those who had tasted the narcotic and oblivion-inducing lotus forcefully tied up and subsequently carried to the ship becomes a tale of drunken sailors who tried to mutiny; Odysseus’s remarkable defeat of the giant Cyclops becomes a mere fight with a one-eyed tavern-keeper over non-payment of the bill; the encounter with the voracious cannibals – just a brawl with ear-bites, nosebleeds, stabbings and eviscerations; the fascinating enchantress Circe appears as the mere seductive Madam of an expensive whorehouse that Odysseus sponged on (83–84); the Hades episode prosaically turns into a night spent in a gloomy old cave full of bats, while the irresistible Sirens are in fact high-class courtesans in “a Sicilian knocking shop..., known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits” (91). This translation of the episodes from one register and genre into the low mimetic one corroborate Graham Allen’s statement that parody is not an empty, playful recording of culture, but “a radical questioning of the available forms of representation and thus the available mode of knowledge within culture” (Allen 190).

When she realized that she too was turned into a story, or rather stories, the same sort of contradictory stories “both clean and dirty”(3), Penelope became eager to tell her own version of the events, but she had to wait a long time or else her defence might have sounded like admitting 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 as brave and resourceful as Odysseus himself. When her husband returns home and they exchange stories, she describes his as “the nobler version,” implicitly casting doubt on her own account. She practically cancels the truth-value of their recitals by highlighting his and her own status of unreliable narrators:

The two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either of us believed a word the other said.
But we did. Or so we told each other. (173)

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!" (49)

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 (31). But she also reveals a new facet of Ulysses, his kindness as a husband and his appreciation of companionship with a clever wife.

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 (33) , to her advantage. Jealous envy of her cousin Helen's beauty is another facet of Penelope's personality set off by *The Penelopiad*.

However, we consider that the main purpose of Atwood's epic is to offer a female counterpart to the archetypal epic/romance pattern is its "threefold structure" (Frye 187): the (mythical) hero's birth (with the possible announcement of an exceptional destiny), the hero's deeds (preparation, quest, tests of prowess), and reward (Durand 174). The romance has always been defined in male terms where the hero, heroine and villain are described in Jung's archetypes as libido, anima, and shadow. These are the terms of Homer's *Odyssey* with Odysseus as the hero, with multiple villains corresponding to the various episodes and Penelope as the virtuous heroine and reward.

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 in the first place and then 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" (161):

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 (160)."

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. (41)

The symbolic feminization of nature as well as the maids' vulnerability is underscored by the bird metaphors that Penelope uses for her pet slaves: "My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves" (160); furthermore, the narrator herself gets the nickname of "duck" after being rescued from drowning by a flock of ducks.

On top of having intuited the usefulness of dissimulation in her relationship with her father after the episode of her near drowning at his order, Penelope is also schooled in the art of pretending by her own husband on her very wedding night, when he is nice and promises to be gentle:

“Forget everything you have been told,” he whispered, “I’m not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both if you could pretend. I’ve been told you’re a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams? That would satisfy them – they’re listening at the door – and they’ll leave us in peace and we can take our time to become friends.” (44)

Another new detail Atwood credits Penelope with is the fact that she did recognize her husband, while only pretending she had been taken in by his disguise – because “it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and his own cleverness (137).

The hero having fulfilled his quest, the final stage is his reward. With Atwood’s epos, Penelope’s reward is her husband’s return, but her joy is short-lived, for “No sooner had Odysseus returned than he left again” (173). Atwood denies Odysseus the status of the Western man that Tennyson exalted in his poem “Ulysses”; Lord Tennyson had obviously drawn on Dante’s portrait of Ulysses in Canto XXVI of the latter’s *Inferno*:

.....This grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. (Tennyson 96)

In the *Penelopiad* Odysseus motivates his setting out on a new voyage by the necessity to purify himself, “to rinse the blood of the suitors from himself, and [to] avoid the vengeful ghosts and their vengeful relatives” (174), as recommended by Teiresias. Yet, although Penelope finds the story likely, she describes her husband driven by a compulsion “to go adventuring again,” a word that lends itself to different interpretations.

Odysseus’ zest for life and adventures is corroborated by his frequent reincarnations (as a French general, a Mongolian invader, a tycoon in America, a headhunter in Borneo, a film star, an advertising man), whereas Penelope never wants to go up into the living world although she is interested in the technological progress of the 21st century. She refuses reincarnation and warns women, “Don’t follow my example,” irritated at having become “a stick to beat women with” (2).

Penelope says that although she has frequently tried to confront the nurse in Hades about her motives, she has always carefully avoided any discussion. Consequently, Penelope will never be able to know the truth and neither will the reader. The structure of Atwood’s *Penelopiad* embodies the postmodernist principle of indeterminacy of meaning and this vision extends to the presentation of Penelope’s portrait. This picture is enriched with the trait of cynicism, as Helen underlines. She also treats the gods with little respect and even confesses to sometimes doubting their existence.

There is a direct contradiction between Penelope’s presentation of Eurycleia’s reasons for having singled out the 12 maids for Odysseus to kill in vindication of the honour of his house and the motives that the 12 maids dramatize in the show they perform, entitled “The Perils of Penelope” They claim that their queen had Amphinomus as one of her lovers, or even that all the over 100 suitors took turns with her (a promiscuous act whereby she gave birth to the goat-god Pan), rumours that Penelope

dismisses as mere slanderous gossip (143–44), even though in one moment of possible sincerity she confesses to having experienced sexual temptations in her dreams (105).

If Penelope tells her own story to a 21st century audience, the 12 maids use a variety of verse forms addressing Odysseus, their direct murderer, and Penelope, the moral author of their deaths. They give a picture of their lives at king Odysseus' court, venting their frustrations, suffering the social injustices of the time – when slaves were being treated as working tools or as objects of sexual gratification. They undergo a double oppression: social oppression as slaves and gender oppression in a patriarchal society. By acquiring a narrative voice, they are empowered and are able to seek justice in a courtroom even if after over 3000 years.

The 12 maids also put forth another interpretation of the suitors' slaughter and their own hanging: that of their being the 12 priestesses – with Penelope as the High Priestess of an Artemis cult and their killing as a sacrificial ritual. Thus the whole episode can be regarded as “the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians led by Odysseus. But their “anthropology lecture” (although based on possibly relevant ancient texts found in Robert Graves' book, as Atwood mentions in her *Notes*) is a parody self-mockingly styled as “merely unfounded feminist claptrap” (106).

It is significant that the 12 maids have the last word in the *Penelopiad*, since they recite the envoi proclaiming their decision to haunt both Penelope and Odysseus for eternity.

In conclusion, readers end up with contradictory versions of events and characters as they can never know the truth, being tied up in an utterly puzzling indeterminacy of meaning, for postmodernism “remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers” (Hutcheon 118). Has Penelope been the perfect patient devoted wife, a cunning lustful pretender, or the High Priestess of an Artemis cult? The reader can remember the adage “there is no smoke without fire,” but also the saying, “A whore will always think that all women are whores.”

Obviously revisionist perspectives have narrative consequences not only for narrators but also for readers, turning our attention towards processes of deconstruction and reconstruction while emphasizing the provisionality of any narrative structure. Atwood's novels are characterized by their refusals to invoke any final authority as their open endings resist conclusiveness, offering instead hesitation, absence or silence while hovering on the verge of new possibilities. Their indeterminacy is a challenge to readers, for one of the problems we have to confront is how to find a critical language to describe Atwood's “borderline fiction” with its ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, fictive artifice and moral engagement. (Howells 10)

Although they cannot know the truth, the readers will become aware of various possible interpretations – in a typically postmodernist way – and will certainly be amused by the deconstructive “humanization” of the faithful wife “legend.”

Note

The novella (2005) was turned into a play by the author herself and staged in 2007 as a NAC/Royal Shakespeare Company co-production with its premieres at Stratford – upon – Avon in July and at Ottawa in September.

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