**The Reception of Homer in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad***

The lens of modern feminism has reshaped readers' views and sympathies about so many women in Greek mythology, from Madeline Miller's more sympathetic portrayal of Circe to Natalie Haynes's more appealing version of Medusa. Yet one of the most interesting characters from the *Odyssey* who has been redefined for the modern reader is Penelope in Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad*. Since the Middle Ages, the reception of Penelope has been flawed. She has been held up as the ideal wife: one who is loyal to her husband for 20 years, remains faithful despite the temptations of over one hundred suitors, and cries herself to sleep most nights waiting for his return.[1] In *The Penelopiad*, however, Margaret Atwood aims to destroy this virtuous image of Penelope. For Atwood, as she states simply in the Introduction to the text, the version of Penelope in the *Odyssey* "doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies"[2]. Penelope, and women more broadly in the epic poem, have been painted as passive and simplistic, and Atwood aims to do them justice in her novella. This essay will explore how Atwood creates a more realistic and humanised version of Penelope which is more relatable to the modern reader and challenges the heroism of Odysseus. It will also analyse the role of the maids throughout the text and how Atwood uses them to make a political point on the silencing of women and those of a lower class in Greek society. Ultimately, through her reception of the *Odyssey*, Atwood fuses the classical and the modern, creating a compelling argument about social injustice and forcing the reader to reflect on contemporary issues such as gender and power.

To begin with, Atwood attempts to remodel the women of the *Odyssey* in a realistic way, bringing to attention both the virtues and flaws that are left unconsidered in the poem. One inconsistency of the *Odyssey* that Atwood addresses is how age affects the beauty of the characters. Helen in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* is described as shining "like Artemis of the golden arrows"[3] but Atwood is keen to point out the ageing that Helen must have endured in the 10 years since the end of the war. Referring seemingly directly to this line, Penelope comments that "Helen could not possibly still be as radiant as golden Aphrodite! It would not be within nature!"[4]. This line reveals

[1] Russell, 2014
[2] *The Penelopiad*, Introduction
[3] *Odyssey*, book 4, line 123
[4] *Penelopiad*, p132

Atwood's dislike of Homer's portrayal of women: it is unnatural and idealised, and the way that women have been held up to this standard in the past is wrong. The women from the *Odyssey* that are represented in this novella are immediately much more human and understandable than the archetypes in the *Odyssey*, and so Helen is not the most beautiful of all women, but her beauty fades just as with any mortal. Atwood, then, is removing the mythological characteristics of the people in the story to make them more realistic, reinforcing the feminist message of the book that standards women were held to since antiquity are irrational.

Yet the most interesting character that Atwood reworks is Penelope, whom she transforms into a deep and complex character by revealing her to be jealous and embittered, not just an unrealistic, doting wife. Atwood's characterisation is in many ways a rediscovery of Penelope in the original poem, whose virtues of wit and cleverness have been undermined by her portrayal since as an overly loving wife and passive victim of the suitors. In antiquity, as MacKay writes, Penelope provided a role model for Roman wives because of her "knowing her place",[5] in contrast to the women of Greek drama, such as Clytemnestra who takes Aegisthus as her lover and kills her husband. Even in the modern day, Catholics such as Dr Mitchell Kalpakgian have argued that her strength as a mother and faithful wife show her to embody the Christian ideal of a good wife.[6] Atwood throughout her novella successfully highlights the intelligence and agency of women in mythological texts which is often overlooked.

The most effective way in which Atwood brings Penelope to life is the use of the first-person narrator in most sections of the novel, giving a direct relationship between Penelope and the reader, as opposed to the 3rd person omniscient narrator of the *Odyssey*. This is most vivid when she talks about Helen, whose elopement with Paris caused the Trojan War, and she calls her, "Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes"[7]. In this line, Atwood plays with the epithets used in epic poetry. Helen's epithet in the *Iliad* is λευκώλενος ("white-armed"), indicative of her noble status as a woman who did not have to work,[8] but rather than "white" and beautiful, here she is dirty and "septic". Penelope's sarcasm in the

[5] MacKay, 1958
[6] Kalpakgian, 2015
[7] Penelopiad, p131
[8] Edmunds, 2019

adjective “lovely” goes on to reveal her pure hatred when she calls her a “bitch”. Throughout this line, and in the language of the novella more broadly, Penelope’s character comes across as very modern and forthcoming as opposed to her representation as a quiet and weeping wife. In this way, she springs to life as a spiteful, vengeful character in a more realistic manner than the passive woman who waits that she has often been portrayed as. Penelope in the *Odyssey* is one of outstanding intelligence, who tricks the suitors to delay marrying them and sets the test to find out whether it is really Odysseus who has returned, and so Atwood is highlighting these parts of her character that have been overlooked in representations that have her as a simple, doting wife, such as her portrayal in Christine de Pizan’s novel *The Book of the City of Ladies*.[9]

Moreover, Atwood goes further than Homer in her representation of Penelope, particularly in her wisdom. Whilst in the *Odyssey* Book 22, Penelope must first test Odysseus’s knowledge about their bedpost being the trunk of a tree before believing that it is really him, in the *Penelopiad*, she says “I didn’t let on I knew … it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness”[10]. Atwood’s Penelope is much wilier and wittier (and in many ways a contemporary feminist), and in this way she appears more relatable for the modern reader, alongside reinforcing Atwood’s argument that her voice as an intelligent woman has been silenced over time because her representations in the Middle Ages do not match the intelligence she shows in the *Odyssey*.

Furthermore, another interesting aspect of the myth that Atwood considers is Penelope’s relationship with her husband. Through Penelope’s narration, Atwood chooses to keep her loyal to her husband, as some Greek sources such as Pausanias suggested that she slept with the suitors,[11] but she does question her nature as a constantly devoted wife. When describing how she has kept Odysseus’s estates for him, a difficult task that also emphasises her intelligence, Penelope says, “How pleased he would be with me! ‘You’re worth a thousand Helens,’ he would say. Wouldn’t he?”[12]. Again, Atwood exploits the character of Helen to show Penelope as vindictive due to lacking her beauty and being jealous of the attention shown towards

[9] Mikala, 2016
[10] *Penelopiad*, p137
[11] Pausanias, 8.12.6
[12] *Penelopiad*, p89

her. Her love of her husband is not total, as suggested in the *Odyssey*, but rather Atwood reveals that Penelope is insecure of herself and her husband's love (quite a realistic concern, given how promiscuous Odysseus is in the *Odyssey*). The rhetorical question at the end of this quotation highlights that she is aware of how fanciful her dreams of Odysseus returning are. Waiting beyond hope is one of Penelope's virtues in the *Odyssey*, and arguably it makes her a strong female character because she stands up for herself against her suitors, but Atwood provides a more human side to her here in a way that is relatable and believable to the reader.

On a similar note, in the *Odyssey*, the love that Penelope has for Odysseus is undying and their reunion at the end of the poem is a beautiful moment. Atwood calls this devotion into question throughout. Penelope hears with jealousy of his stays with Calypso and then Circe and that "the two of them made love deliriously every night"[13]. It could be argued that the presentation of Odysseus's unfaithfulness is overstated and that, in the epic, he is still keen to return to his wife. For example, he decides to leave Calypso because "the nymph was no longer pleasing in his sight. By night indeed he would sleep by her side perforce"[14]. The adverbs "deliriously" and "perforce" mark a stark difference between the two representations of his character. Yet, this portrayal of Odysseus feeds into the broader point of Atwood's work. She is deconstructing the heroism that he is given in the *Odyssey*, showing him instead to be corrupt (a point she goes on to discussing when dealing with the deaths of the maids), and this portrayal allows the reader to question how justified his glorified heroic status is because of the collateral affect he has had on others, especially women.

By the end of the novella, Penelope is consumed by love and is willing to look over his flaws, but this presentation is realistic because Atwood highlights equally Penelope's own wily and sexually attractive nature. Penelope comments about the suitors' attention to her that "I can't pretend that I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this"[15]. Olivia LeClair argues that the *Odyssey* describes Penelope as sexually attractive and aware, such as when Athena makes her more sexually desirous for

[13] *Penelopiad*, p84
[14] *Odyssey*, book 5, lines 153-154
[15] *Penelopiad*, p104

the suitors[16] or when the suitors “all prayed, each that he might lie by her side”[17], and that this has been lost in much of its reception because of authors wanting to show Penelope as pure. However, Atwood brings this back into her character quite successfully.[18] By emphasising this side of her character, the ending of the novella, where Penelope’s love is rekindled by meeting her husband again and can forgive him for his actions, makes more sense. Odysseus tells Penelope that he had missed her even when sleeping with goddesses and she tells him that she had never once considered betraying him with the suitors. Penelope then comments “The two of us were…proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other.”[19]. This marks a departure from the simpler, purer, and romanticised relationship in the *Odyssey*; here, Atwood’s depiction of their love is more complex, but more realistic. Atwood shows Penelope to be Odysseus’s equal in terms of cunning and intelligence, and so the idea of a perfect marriage between two such characters, as in the *Odyssey*, seems improbable; rather, Atwood shows their relationship to be one of pragmatism, since Odysseus won Penelope in a contest, but also one of deep respect for each other’s intelligence.

Thus, Atwood reworks and reimagines Penelope in the *Odyssey*, creating a more believable wife who is concerned and jealous about her husband. The love they have for each other is one that suits their characters, since they are both fiercely intelligent liars, and their reunion at the end of the novella – as people who have not seen each other for decades and have not been completely faithful to each other – is much more realistic than in the *Odyssey*. Both harbour distrust for each other, but they recognise too their own flaws, and this allows a reunion that the reader can accept. The characters of the *Odyssey* can be seen in many ways as archetypes, but Atwood makes them much more believable as humans; Penelope’s representation seems strikingly modern, and this allows her to be relatable to the 21st century reader.

Secondly, another aspect to consider in how Atwood receives the *Odyssey* is the role of the maids as a tool to discuss the silencing of women and those of a low

[16] *Odyssey*, book 18, line 180
[17] *Odyssey*, book 1, line 365
[18] LeClair, 2023
[19] *Penelopiad*, p173

social status. Atwood's novella aims to show alternative perspectives to the original myths, as seen in the adoption of the title *The Penelopiad* (a play on the *Iliad*) which is all about Penelope as opposed to the *Odyssey* being about Odysseus's story. The incorporation of a woman's name in the title in itself confronts the marginalisation of women in classical mythology and, in the same way that the *Odyssey* celebrates traditional masculine heroism, signals that this text is a celebration of women, and part of this is the story of the maids. In Book 22 of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus (under his father's orders) hangs 12 of Penelope's maids who have assisted and slept with the suitors. Atwood states that the question of why these maids were hanged was one of her reasons for writing the novella[20] since the epic does not expand on their stories. One way in which Atwood gives the maids a voice is the variation of narrative voice throughout the novella. It is not entirely narrated from Penelope's point of view; rather, Penelope's narration is interspersed with various scenes from the maids who form a Chorus from Greek tragedy, performing at first classical chorus lines and laments but then progressing to sea shanties, ballads, lectures, and a videotape of a court.

The maids provide a commentary on the disparity between the standards that men and women were judged by in the ancient world. In their first introduction in a chorus line, they speak as if addressing Odysseus: "it was not fair / with every goddess, queen, and bitch / from there to here / you scratched your itch / we did much less"[21]. Here, they emphasise Odysseus' relationships with the women he met on his travels and yet he was still called a hero, whilst they "did much less" and for that were hanged. Moreover, Atwood creates pathos for these women, lending a voice to the voiceless and providing an interesting story to those who were glossed over in the *Odyssey*. The maids say, "we scrubbed the blood / of our dead / paramours from floors, from chairs"[22] which shows Odysseus's heartlessness and cruelty because he slaughtered the suitors and made the maids clean up their blood.

However, Atwood focuses not just on the maids, but on all of those whose stories are left untold by Homer. In their fifth chorus line, this time taking the form of a sea shanty, the maids speak as Odysseus's sailors. They narrate his exploits on his

[20] *Penelopiad*, Introduction
[21] *Penelopiad*, p5
[22] *Penelopiad*, p6

journeys as described in the *Odyssey* but with a focus on how he brought about their deaths. Their penultimate line, “For he’s not down in Hades, unlike all of we”[23], brings attention to the suffering and danger that his men faced and yet their names and personal tales go mainly without note in the epic poem. Whilst Odysseus was able to escape all of this with his life, they were doomed to die and be forgotten. Atwood, then, is highlighting in a negative way that which is celebrated in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’s cunning and adventure, and is making a political point that the story is told in a patriarchal society and so what is painted as just in the poem – such as the maids’ deaths because of their disloyalty – is unfair and does not tell the full story. She is therefore deconstructing the heroism which Odysseus is given in Homer’s poem.

In addition, Atwood’s use of different perspectives becomes even more deeply layered towards the end of the novella as the maids themselves turn against Penelope. Though Atwood’s depiction of Penelope during the prose chapters of the novella show her (through her own words) as sexually loyal to Odysseus, the maids provide an alternative view on this in one of their final chorus lines, a drama. This serves to build the complex picture of Penelope that is created towards the end where the reader knows that she can lie to Odysseus and wonders whether she is an unreliable narrator. The maids enact Penelope telling Odysseus’s nurse to say that the maids were unfaithful to hide her infidelity: “While he was pleasuring every nymph and beauty, / Did he think I’d do nothing but my duty? … / And I in fame a model wife shall rest”[24]. Atwood is proposing different reasons for the maids’ deaths here in order to complete the story that doesn’t make sense in the *Odyssey* by suggesting that they were framed by Penelope. These different perspectives are meant to be confusing to the reader because that was the true nature of Greek myth at the time. As has been mentioned, Pausanias proposed the alternative storyline that Penelope was unfaithful, and this story coexisted with Homer’s poem, and yet that myth was largely ignored in the coming centuries because it fitted the patriarchal narrative for Penelope to be the perfect wife and a good role model for women.[25] In this way, Atwood is keeping the complexity and beauty of mythology by showing different versions and explanations of events. She is showing the fact that characters

[23] *Penelopiad*, p98
[24] *Penelopiad*, p149-151
[25] LeClair, 2023

in stories, just as people do in real life, see things in different ways and that no-one is perfect. *The Penelopiad* does not try and paint Penelope as a perfect character or as any sort of hero, rather it remains true to the complex nature of human nature and the contradictory storytelling of Greek mythology. Thus, it serves as a response from the modern world to what seems an irrational representation of women and those of low status in antiquity. The role of the maids in this passage highlights that stories have too often been told from the perspective of those of a high status in society, and so Atwood is offering a different perspective by giving a voice to the marginalised.

This merger of the classical with the modern provides the reader a chance to reflect on the modern world. As discussed previously, Atwood's language brings the characters out of mythology and into a modern setting, and this is symbolised with the maids who are used at first in a strictly classical context (with traditional chorus lines as seen in Greek drama) but then move into more modern mediums (such as lectures). Through this, Atwood is making the reader more conscious of what the maids symbolise: injustice, because they were hanged for being raped by the suitors, and how sidelined those of a low status are in classical (and even to some extent) modern storytelling. One of the chorus lines towards the end of the novella is a court scene to debate whether Odysseus was guilty of the deaths of the suitors and the maids. Set much more clearly in the modern day, this scene is quite jarring for the reader who might have expected a simple retelling of the myth set in its time. Seana McKenna argues that the distance of thousands of years helps to remove the reader from the characters, but that the modern sections allow us a chance to relate to the book's themes in a time when we're rediscovering women's voices from the past and challenging the silencing of women past and present.[26] Though it is easy, when reading the *Odyssey,* to be removed from the horror of death because of its mythical status, and so the deaths of the maids can be glossed over with little discomfort, Atwood's novella humanises them and refuses to allow the reader to ignore parts of the story that are uncomfortable to read.

Finally, Atwood goes on to use these characters from Greek myth to make a political point on the presence of Odysseus-like characters in our modern world. Penelope,

[26] McKenna, 2019

narrating her story from the underworld in our present time, says that Odysseus keeps being reborn: “a French general … a tycoon in America … a film star, an inventor, an advertising man”[27] and Telemachus, the one who actually acted to hang the maids, is an MP. This, in part, is the role of classical reception and its study. Stories like *The Penelopiad* provide a link between the morals, values, and characters of the classical world and our own, making the reader cast judgement on the world around them. Just as Odysseus and Telemachus silenced the maids in myth, Atwood is arguing that such voices and opinions still exist, and that the reader cannot be entirely comfortable relegating such opinions to thousands of years ago but must face them in the modern world.

In conclusion, *The Penelopiad* does much more than redefine the women in the *Odyssey*. Atwood states in her Introduction that she wants to answer 2 questions that she had when reading the epic: why were the maids hanged, and what was Penelope really up to. Atwood embraces the tropes of Greek epic and drama to reveal a more complex picture of events where the reader cannot know the real truth of what happened, just as different, often contradictory perspectives were shown in Greek myth. Atwood humanises and modernises Penelope, bringing a dose of realism to her separation from Odysseus, and through the maids she reveals the double standards in terms of gender and social class that existed in the classical world. But it is through this that she holds a mirror up to the reader about such events in our own world, and it is this intersection between the classical and the modern that makes the novella so intriguing. This combination of the classical and modern exists in the very form of the novella too by introducing conventions such as the Greek chorus, and in this way Atwood is challenging modern ideas about how books should be written. This reception of the *Odyssey* by Atwood, then, focuses on the marginalised and shows that there are stories to be found in those who are traditionally silenced, and so the novella forms part of a struggle for the representation of women and those of a low social class. Atwood shows classical reception at its best where it is not just a reflection on antiquity, but on our own values as well.

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[27] *Penelopiad*, 189-190

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